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Democratic PR? : Relationship-building between members of parliament and their constituents

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Project Title

Democratic PR?
Relationship-building between Members of Parliament and their constituents.

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Abstract

This paper puts forward the proposition that relationship-building public relations could facilitate a more genuine engagement between Members of Parliament and their constituents. Much has been written about Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetric public relations and its role in establishing, building and maintaining a sense of community between an organisation and its publics. Previous work has extended the relationship management paradigm to various sub contexts such as the non-for profit sector. However, the majority of literature provides an organisation-centric perspective. This paper takes the Grunigian notion of symbiotic relationship building and applies it to the political context. This study focuses its observations and analysis within the political microcosm at democracy's interface between the local Member of Parliament and their constituents. The objective of this study was to evaluate how public relations is currently used at electorate level and to suggest how it could be improved. In doing so, the researcher spent a year in a marginal seat leading up to the 2007 Federal Election and gained rare insight into the mind of the incumbent, the Party machine and the critical role of PR in the democratic process.

‘At the heart of strong democracy is talk’

(Benjamin Barber, 1984)

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Prima facie, the notion of democratic public relations seems like a contradiction in terms. We have all heard the familiar catch cry that public relations (PR) is spin. But is the entire profession the antithesis of democracy? The first step in discussing if PR can be democratic requires differentiating between the two fundamentally different types of PR: PR that aims to persuade and PR that aims to build relationships. Persuasion is a ubiquitous and entrenched feature of contemporary politics, whereas relationship-building has untapped potential. In its broadest sense, this thesis explores the proposition that relationship-building PR could make a positive contribution to the practice of democracy.

The core concept of democracy is that citizens should have a 'say' in the decisions that affect their lives. If the ideal of self-rule is one we truly value, then the views of citizens should shape the actions of those who govern on their behalf. For most, this amounts to casting a vote every three years. So how do we facilitate an on-going and productive dialogue, so that voters can have a say in between elections? This thesis suggests a solution may lie in the capacity of PR to build relationships between the Member of Parliament (MP) and their constituents.

The thesis uses the Federal electorate of Hasluck as a case study to explore how PR is currently practised in the modern Australian electorate as well as to suggest changes to those practices, if changes are indeed required. This presented an opportunity to examine the political microcosm, at democracy's interface. Democracy exists within a singular electorate because it is carried out in the simple exchange between the local MP and their constituents. At the most basic level, if we can improve the quality of this engagement, and then replicate it across each electorate, the sum of its parts could have far-reaching benefits for democracy as a whole.

Thus, the major research aims of this thesis are:

- I. to investigate how PR is currently used in the electorate office; and
- II. to explore how the relationship between Members of Parliament and their constituents may be improved.

This thesis argues that by applying the two-way Symmetrical model of PR, a model that epitomises relationship-building, current practice may be improved as this approach would use a more ethical, effective and mutually beneficial method of communication. In this sense, this thesis is a normative project that explores whether the ideal model of PR should be applied in practice.

Précis of the Chapters

Chapter 2 looks at the debate about the convergence of PR and modern politics that raises questions for further consideration.

Chapter 3 explains the methods used in this case study: participant observation in the electorate office and an in-depth interview with Mr Henry, which gives rare insight into the role of PR within a political context.

Chapter 4 provides background to Mr Henry's electorate office and the operational rigidity that contributed to his campaign defeat.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed overview of Mr Henry's views on the role of the modern MP and the process of communication with his electorate throughout his first term.

Chapter 6 compares the interview data with the observation of PR practice in the Hasluck electorate office.

Chapter 7 provides suggestions on how the Symmetrical model of PR might be operationalised in the modern electorate.

Chapter 2 The Convergence of PR and Politics

The impact of the convergence of PR and politics is a frequent and fervently debated subject in both fields of political communication and public relations (PR). The large body of previous literature is primarily concerned with the implications of PR on democracy. For critical theorists, PR is necessarily partisan and intrinsically undemocratic (L'etang, 1996; Kersten, 1994; Gandy, 1982). For rhetorical scholars, public relations is a legitimate, an indeed, essential component of modern political communication (Heath & Toth, 1992; Barnay & Black 1994). This chapter will address this polarised debate and call into question the underlying premise that all PR does is spin. To view PR in this way, discounts the full capacity of the profession to serve a societal purpose.

Is PR Undemocratic?

In 2001, the then president of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, Jim McNamara examined the use of media releases in news stories by tracking their sources over a twelve-month period. He found that forty-seven percent of articles were a direct result of PR activity. That was seven years ago. Since then, it has been suggested that Australia has become a PR State to the detriment of political culture (Ward, 2003). McNair (1998) portrays PR as a destructive force, "Public relations is like the atomic bomb; having been invented, it cannot be uninvented" (p.96). Political commentators claim that, the line between campaigning and governing has disappeared and the Australian public is subjected to permanent campaigning through PR strategies (Mann & Ornstein, 2000, p.84; Errington & van Onselen, 2004).

PR professionals suffer from the pejorative label 'spin-doctors'. This negative perception is shared by critical scholars and political commentators (Berger, 1999; Elwood, 1995; L'etang & Piezka, 1996; Toth & Heath, 1992). PR is commonly regarded as the attempt to gain favourable media coverage, and subsequently, PR is perceived solely as exploitation to further partisan interests (Turner, 2002). The desires of the party politick to manage image and influence perception is often referred to derogatively as the 'packaging of politics'. On the contrary, some feel

that the use of “persuasion is a glorious art, the very art by which democracy functions, survives and prospers” (Stockwell, 2006, p.4). Yet it is contended that while spin is an art form for the players, it is increasingly a problem for the system (Grattan, 2005). Packaging has been denounced as a concept of professional political communication that is managed and controlled by spin doctors who seek to erode democracy (Street, 2001, p. 16).

For example, Ward (2003) cites a United States media advisor who reacted to the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 by emailing colleagues saying that, “it is now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury.” Capitalising on the media cycle amidst catastrophic human loss, “epitomises the nadir of the spin merchants and their obsession with government advantage” (Ward, 2003, p.228). When Ward (2003) referred to The PR State as a ‘symptom’ of the Government’s employment of professional communicators, the author implies that media advisers are spreading some kind of disease.

Stockwell (2006), with tongue in cheek, captures the hyperbole of cynicism regarding PR’s involvement in Australian politics. Stockwell’s tone is unique in contrast to the bulk of PR commentary:

Pity the poor spin-doctors. Few occupations are more despised than theirs are. We all know who the spin-doctors are. They are the nasty, nefarious types, stashed in the back of politicians’ offices, twisting words to mean whatever they want. They are responsible for the media’s mendacity and democracy’s decline. They convinced us to go to war in Iraq over weapons of mass destruction that were not there. *They* threw the children overboard (p.1).

On a serious note, the impact of spin can be seen in its ramification on voter perception. The electorate has become increasingly sceptical and weary of PR tactics. In 2005, the Interactive Television Research Institute (ITRI) conducted a study that explored the communication styles of public figures. The study aimed to ascertain which style of communication established trust. The results found that a high-level ‘spin’ style of communication is a large factor contributing to the community’s negative perception of politicians. In short, the public recognised ‘spin’ as untrustworthy. ITRI therefore concluded that a more genuine and authentic

style of communication would assist MPs to communicate effectively and better engage an increasingly sceptical community (ITRI, 2005).

However, it must be noted that this concept has not eluded the savvy political campaigner who strategically advises the MP to engage with voters in a manner, which at the very least *appears* genuine. This can lead to entrapment, "The cycle is self-perpetuating; superficial campaigns breed superficial voters and so forth" (Iyengar & Simon, 2000). Increased public cynicism results in elected officials being obsessed with image, lending spin strategies more importance than the substance of policy and hence, requires more spin to engage an increasingly apathetic audience (L'etang & Pieczka, 1996).

Australian journalist Michelle Grattan (1998) highlights how spin simplifies political messages in order to penetrate through mass media. However, journalists are as culpable as PR practitioners are, in their obsession with headlines, sensationalism and controversy. We have witnessed the policy content of news become devalued, or at least subject to less scrutiny reducing the debate to an unsatisfactory series of eight-second sound bites (Grattan, 1998). Spin style communication dilutes the quality of policy debate but this 'soft' form of news is palatable to mainstream broadcast audiences.

If a prerequisite of democracy is an informed citizenry, what concerns some scholars is the ability of the citizen to receive objective information from MPs when it is packaged by a Media Officer. For example, political communication should explain policy decisions to the public, which is necessary if the government is to proceed with consent (Pritchard, 1990, p.20). However, Barnay & Black (1994) warn that packaging borders on manipulation when it involves selective truth that aims to persuade, rather than merely inform. As a result, the role of the media officer in the political process has been viewed as one of the most pressing issues facing the profession of PR because of its direct impact on democracy (McNair, 1996, p.46).

On the contrary, there is a large body of work arguing that persuasive PR is necessary for democracy to function (Pavlik, 1987, p. 26). A popular argument put

forward is that the growing role of media managers in politics has increased the *quantity* of information circling the electorate (McNair, 1996, p.52). The sheer volume of information generated by media officers is viewed as a positive contribution to democracy where, “the popularising of political communication could be seen as an attempt to restore the relation between politicians and voters, by the constant flow of information between the people and their representatives, to regain the necessary sense of community” (van Zoonen, cited in Street, 2001, p.186). This presents a somewhat romantic view of persuasion; it is arguable that increasing a one-way output of information does not sufficiently meet the criteria of a relationship.

In addition to the quantity of communication, advocates of persuasion claim that the use of rhetoric also increases the *quality* and is therefore, democratically justifiable. For some, rhetoric implies slick and hollow statements that intend to manipulate (Heath, 1992, p.89). In their defence, rhetorical scholars rely on the work of Aristotle who saw the importance of crafted communication to “integrate the logical components of an argument with complementary emotional and character components, in order to create a convincing argument” (Arnhart, 1981, p.32). These scholars prompt us to consider that communication would be somewhat futile without rhetoric. People could not influence opinions or gain an understanding of each other (Heath & Toth, 1992, p.17). Others go further, arguing that rhetoric is vital to free society “PR practitioners should not apologise for it- the persuasion ethic is defensible and laudable in a participatory democracy” (Barney & Black, 1994, p.233).

Whether spin is viewed as strengthening democracy by informing voters or weakening democracy by persuading them depends on the author’s theoretical denomination. “It seems enough to say that one person’s persuasion will always be another’s manipulation, one’s public relations another’s propaganda and that clear-cut distinctions can only be drawn with difficulty” (McNair, 1996, p.97). However, the reality is that the media officer role is structurally embedded in the electorate office. Stockwell (2006) pragmatically concedes that, “The public relations function is a necessary dimension of the modern political process...imperfect as it is” (p.34)

Spin or Saint?

The PR profession has failed to be an effective self-promoter and it is not without irony that PR is experiencing its own identity crisis (Harrison, 2002). Wilson (1989) offers anecdotal illustration of the common misconceptions about PR:

If the circus is coming to town and you paint a sign saying 'Circus in town Friday', that's advertising. If you put a sign on an elephants back and walk him into town that's promotion. And if the elephant walks through the Mayor's flower bed that's publicity... if you can get the Mayor to laugh about it, that's public relations (p.163).

For most, PR is the sign on the elephants back. James Grunig (1992) the pioneer of Symmetrical PR, contends that:

Public Relations is broader than a communication technique and broader than a specialized public relations program such as media relations or publicity. Public Relations describes the overall planning, execution and evaluation of an organisations communication with both internal and external publics — groups which affect the ability of an organisation to meet its goals (p.316).

In consensus, there is a sufficient body of literature challenging the erroneous view that PR is little more than promotion on behalf of vested interests (Botan & Taylor, 2004 Kruckerberg & Stark, 1988). Botan and Taylor (2004) noted that the most striking trend in PR over the past twenty years is the transition from viewing PR as a publicity technique to a relationship-management profession. The shift away from the manipulation of public opinion towards a more humanistic focus on building interpersonal relationships with target publics is an important change in the primary mission of PR (Ehling, 2002).

This transition is reflected in the Public Relations Institute of Australia's (PRIA) formal definition of PR as the management function, which establishes, builds and maintains mutually-beneficial relationships between an organisation and its publics (PRIA). Australian tertiary institutions seek accreditation from the PRIA and subsequently adopt the Institute's definition of PR. On average a PR bachelor's degree is comprised of 28 subject units, only one of these teaches publicity

techniques — all others focus on strategic relationship management (ECU Handbook).

It may surprise the non-professional that PR has been theoretically progressed as a relationship-building function, since 1984 — when Ferguson originally called for relationships to be at the centre of PR research (Pavlik, 1987, p.122). Since then, the work of many scholars view PR through a relationship-management lens that envisions PR as motivated to balance interests and place implicit value on both sides of the relationship. The relational approach has been further developed chronologically by Grunig & Hunt (1984), Kruckerberg & Stark, (1988) Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, (1992), Broom, Casey & Ritchie, (1997), Ledingham & Bruning, (1998, 2000), Huang (2000) and Kent & Taylor (2002), among others.

The prior work of Grunig has central relevance to this thesis because it shaped ways of categorising the practice of PR and subsequently, the genesis of the Symmetrical model. In 1984, Grunig undertook the largest study in the field's history. The 'Excellence Study' surveyed 321 organisations in three countries over a fifteen-year period: the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. The Excellence Study set out to measure the qualities that define 'excellent' PR management within an organisation. The results found four typical ways of conceptualising and conducting the PR function. The four models represent the historical evolution of PR in terms of their purpose, style of communication and use of research.

The first three models are called Press Agency, Public Information and the Two-way Asymmetrical model and can be broadly defined as promotional (L'etang, 1996; Pavlik, 1987; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 1992). As their primary function, these models, "formulate and distribute persuasive information designed to affect target publics in favour of the communicator" (Barney & Black, 1994, p.233).

To give a brief overview of the nomenclature of PR practice:

- I. The first model, Press agency is defined by Grunig & Hunt (1984) as the effort to produce favourable publicity in the mass media and is the most widely-practiced model of PR.

- II. The second model, Public Information, disseminates objective (albeit favourable) information and it emerged around the 1900s, when public officials first recognised the importance of public opinion.
- III. The third type, Two-way Asymmetry is a promotional model but is considered two-way because it uses research to determine the points that can be exploited to persuade a target public. This model was developed for propaganda research during World War I (Guiniven, 2002, p.396).
- IV. Finally, the fourth and most evolved model of PR is called Two-way Symmetry. It can be separated from the first three types because it aims to “build long-term, mutually-beneficial relationships, reconcile conflict through negotiation, and free the flow of information and ideas by facilitating open, honest dialogue” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p.22).

The term ‘Symmetry’ literally means balance. The principle of balance underpins the Symmetrical model in its values, purpose and process. For instance, “research is used to uncover points of agreement, the goal is open dialogue, and honest exchanges in an effort to resolve issues and reach a compromise” (Cutlip, 1995, p. 12). With this in mind, unpacking the concept of Symmetry is best understood by its objective: to create balanced relationships. The model entails the use of bargaining, negotiation and compromise to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes and behaviours of both sides of the relationship (L’etang, 2004, p.11; Hutton, 1999). In other words, it is about using dialogue to build relationships and leverage win-win outcomes.

Symmetrical PR is a site of contention throughout the literature caused by Grunig et al’s (1992) claim that Symmetry is the normative model that benchmarks how PR *should* be practiced. This assertion has attracted rival scholars. In particular, impassioned debate has been sparked within the field over the claim that Symmetry is the most ethical model of PR. For example, L’etang, (1996), Kersten (1994) and Gandy (1982) contend that the Symmetrical model represents, “a utopian attempt to make an inherently evil practice look good” (Cited in Grunig et al, 2002, p.315).

The problem with Symmetrical communication according to L'etang (1996) is that Symmetry chooses to ignore the intrinsic self-interest of corporations. Research findings support the view that organisations tend to look after their own interests. A recent Australian survey found an overwhelming proportion of businesses use promotional PR techniques rather than the more idealistic symmetric communication. In interviews with sixty-four CEO's it was found that, "Achieving communication excellence using symmetric communication will require a significant shift in business attitudes" (Harrison, 2003, p.56). Unfortunately, despite the theoretical transition to relationship management, less than fifteen percent of organisations use the relationship approach in practice (Harrison, 2003, p.56).

Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that PR scholarship has predominantly focused analysis on organisation-public relationships. For instance, Grunig's Excellence Study was funded by the International Association of Business communicators, and therefore, produced organisation-centric view. Since, most PR commentary reflects the organisational discourse; the criticism aimed at the Symmetrical model only applies to the organisational context.

However, this thesis is concerned with PR beyond the organisational realm into an unexplored frontier. The Symmetrical model may be more conducive to a MP-constituent dynamic simply because the MP faces frequent removal via the ballot box. Organisational and political PR can be clearly distinguished in that MPs are duty-bound to serve (albeit reinforced by self-interest) and represent their constituents in parliament- unlike organisations, which are driven by the bottom line. Lane (2005) has suggested that businesses are unlikely to adopt the Symmetrical approach because it would involve a loss of power. Whereas, the MP and constituent dynamic already has a dimension of interdependence, that may prove more conducive to a balanced approach. However, the potential for PR to be used in politics for 'good rather than evil' remains to be seen.

Democracy & Dialogue

Democracy as a value, ideal, concept and practice is significant to this thesis, as democracy exists in each of these constructs. The concept of democracy has its roots in *demokratia* (people-rule) a word first used by Herodotus to describe the Athenian system of Government around 507BC when citizens were able to participate directly in decision-making (Hyland, 1995, p.46). Today, the participatory nature of 'Athenian democracy' is still a highly-valued ideal.

However, since not all can participate personally in all matters of the State (other than a community exceeding a single small town) the past 400 years has seen a representative model of democracy emerge to accommodate citizens of mass societies in their own governance (Mill 1991, p.244). For example, Australia's political system is a representative liberal-democracy. Despite the existence of competing strains within this broad category, central key features are clear. Liberal democracy is an indirect and representative form of democracy in that citizens elect officials at regular elections to represent their interests and rule on their behalf (Heywood, 2002, p.77).

The normative principles behind representative democracy were first defined in the writings of Mill and Rousseau (Delanty, 2005). These theorists argued that government power is mandated through election and that the abuse of power is prevented by making government, as Bentham put it, "frequently removable by the majority of all the people" (Cited from Heywood, 2002, p.73). Representative democracy is seen to provide benefits such as free elections, pluralism and the competitive struggle for the people's vote (Schumpeter, 1976, p.269). It has been said that a citizenry that is disengaged from the decision-making process and confined to occasional voting has a weak relationship with democracy (Patemen, 1970). Yet, the Schumpeterian brand seems like a consolation prize in comparison to direct participation.

The democratic nature of dialogue is a reoccurring theme in the literature. Among the conditions required for an authentic democracy to exist is citizen participation in the debate and deliberation in relation to the decisions that affect their lives

(Heywood, 2002, p.38). “The ubiquity of deliberation as an essential element of democratic practice at so many points along the continuum, highlights the crucial role that discussion and debate play in the prelude to political decision-making and thus, in democracy itself” (Stockwell, 2006, p.15).

The literature suggests that democracy is something that occurs in engagement between electors and the elected. Sociological writings envision democracy as more than an institutionalised construct, instead focusing on the key concept of democracy — where people have their ‘say’. For Giddens, democracy is not a gauge of the general will at the ballot box but rather a process of debate and deliberation (Giddens, 1994, p.132). In this sense, communication between the local MP and constituent is democracy-in-action — a practical exercise that exists because it is carried out (Stockwell, 2006, p.4). Of course, there are echoes here of the Athenian concept of democracy, or indeed the small town ‘sitting around the campfire’ democracy.

Giddens’ argument that dialogue can democratise is comparable to the theory of ‘discursive democracy’ put forward by Frankfurt School critical theorist Habermas (Drysek, 1990). For Habermas, democracy hinges upon the ability (and freedom) of the public to form a discursive arena, that facilitates citizen debate, deliberation in a public sphere (Habermas, 1984). The notion of the public sphere is that of an abstract arena in which the public engages in conversation about political issues. The opinions that emerge out of this discourse should have a role in shaping the actions of the representative. This process is an important aspect of the ideal of self-government (Lumby & Probyn, 2003, p.30).

Despite the normative assumptions about the role of the public sphere, Giddens (1994) is concerned, like many others, with the declining effectiveness of representative government (Putnam, 2005). There is a need to provide more insight into the dilemma of how to engage citizens in the policy process according to more democratic outcomes (Pierce, Stager, Steel & Lovrich, 1992). Stockwell (2006) admits the need to democratise communication between MPs and constituents to provide the debate, discussion and deliberation on which democracy depends.

While it is agreed that communication between government and citizens is a way of strengthening democracy, Stockwell (2006) poses the question:

How can a more communicative form of democracy find application in the currently existing systems of representative democracy? The answer is difficult. This is not to dismiss the importance of interpersonal discussion and small group debate but merely to acknowledge the difficulty in producing authentic democratic deliberation in mass societies (p. 17).

On this point, it is important to note that a complete overhaul of the political system may not be necessary simply because the system is a sum of its parts. Governments are lost and won on a seat-by-seat basis, given that, each of the one hundred and fifty Members of the House of Representatives are elected by the citizens within the boundaries of their electorate. In keeping with this idea, it could be said that the on the 24th of November 2007 Australia held one hundred and fifty separate by-elections. Therefore, it could be argued that we only need to focus on how democracy is done at the electorate level to make a real difference. It has been suggested that discursive forms of democracy could evolve current practices to become more representative and more participatory (Arbaster, 1987; Bobbio, 1987).

In summary, critics and commentators have viewed PR through a persuasion lens and subsequently both fields of political communication and PR have overlooked the potential of relationship-building in a political context. Simultaneously, the literature has established that there is room for improvement within the current political system. However, at this point previous work arrives at a stalemate. This raises questions deserved of further exploratory research. How can communication facilitate the genuine re-engagement of representatives with the lives and concerns of their constituency? This thesis suggests that the Symmetrical approach may be a viable option. The challenge is to ascertain whether this approach can be both ideal and practical for electorate offices to implement.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This thesis builds on previous work by initiating empirical research on Symmetrical PR in a new context. In doing so, this thesis investigates the construct of dialogic democracy within the political microcosm, particularly between MP and constituent. The most suitable approach to achieve this aim is qualitative research methodology and empirical inquiry. A case study is defined as, “an empirical inquiry that uses multiple sources of evidence to investigate when a contemporary phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1994, p. 26).

A unique strength of qualitative enquiry in social and cultural settings is that data is experienced subjectively — it is able to explore the subjective state of the participants the qualitative method promotes discovery into the explicit and implicit meaning revealed in the participant’s discourse, interaction and self-reporting (Minchinello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995, p. 39). Qualitative analysis, therefore, permits the interpretation of data in an exploratory manner and the conveyance of rich, deep information. Hence, the qualitative approach was chosen as the most suitable approach to elucidate the subjective nuances of the findings.

Data Collection

Participant Observation

I occupied a position as an observer and participant when I worked within the electoral office of Stuart Henry MP and as a committee member of Mr Henry’s campaign. The aims of this case study would be unachievable without the advantage of being an accepted participant — being privy to data collection of a politically-sensitive nature is typically restricted.

The benefits of participant observation include access, insight and resources that consequently transpose to an array of data collection methods. McCall and Simmons (1969) describe the variety of methods involved in the participant observer role. They maintain that: “...participant observation is not a single method but rather a characteristic style of research which makes use of a number of

methods and techniques: observation, interviewing, document analysis, and participation with self-analysis" (p.1).

Participant observation demands that researchers spend time with relatively small groups of people in order to understand fully the social milieu that they inhabit (Smith, 1997). Participant observation is poor at dealing with large-scale cases such as large organisations or national economies. However, this case study focuses on broad concepts (democracy) but analyses them within the microcosm of a singular electorate and in particular, the public relations practice utilised by the electorate office in attempt to communicate with constituents. Therefore, participant observation is appropriate to the scope of investigation.

Participating in the case study has several strengths in terms of level of involvement and access. For instance, my ability to carry out the study is enhanced by a greater understanding of the observed meanings and actions since I also personally experienced them. Firstly, my level of involvement has varied in terms of status, role and activities giving me a range of insights relating to the research aims. I was employed as a staff member in Mr Henry's electorate office from November 2006 to February 2007 in the position of Media Officer. This brief (yet intense immersion) into the Media Officer's role provided an understanding of how PR is used in a marginal seat. As a continuing staff member in various roles over a 12-month period, I was able to observe without disturbing the natural discussions or events that take place in an electorate office.

One of these roles included being an official member of Mr Henry's campaign committee since early 2006. I occupied the roles of volunteer and assistant polling day coordinator. This role afforded a vote on committee motions, facilitating direct input into campaign decision-making. This kind of position indicates a level of trust between amongst colleagues and I. Smith (1997) highlights the benefits of access, "Participant observation does not simply mean 'hanging around' to become part of a social scene and participate in it and requires that the researcher be accepted to some degree" (p.87). I was able to gain rare insight into the internal party machine and campaign strategies.

Fieldwork Diary

I recorded my observations using a fieldwork diary, which is the most common form of documenting personal insights (Burgess, 1984). The reason for keeping a research diary is to facilitate the research process through recording observations, thoughts and questions as they happen, for later use and to stimulate reflective thinking about the data (Newbury, 2001). The research diary provides a form through which the interaction of subjective and objective aspects of doing research can be recorded. In keeping with this notion, Hastrup (1992) comments that, "fieldwork is situated between autobiography and anthropology" (p. 117). In purely practical terms, the diary writing process is highly reflective as it is often very difficult to separate out the writing of purely descriptive observational field notes, as one records particular event, theoretical concepts and other leads that often come to mind (Newbury, 2001). Although there are no 'rules' as to how research diaries or field notes should be compiled a semi-structured approach helps to control spontaneous tangents.

In-depth Interview

The case study's in-depth interview was chosen with Mr Henry as a methodology because it allowed access to the motives, meanings, actions and reactions of Mr Henry in the context of his daily life. The recursive model of interviewing was adopted due to an on going working relationship that has been established with Mr Henry. The recursive model is supportive of familiarity, which enables a conversational style. Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) depict this form of questioning as "relying on the social interaction between interviewer and participant to elicit information." In this way, the natural flow of conversation can direct the interview. For these reasons, the interview was deliberately informal and unstructured to facilitate open, flowing discussion so that themes in natural discourse can emerge. Simultaneously, "the more familiar the researcher is with the language of the interviewee, the more accurate the interpretation will be" (Smith, 1997, p. 86).

Data Analysis

Similar to data collection, analysis of data requires a semi-structured approach for reasons of internal validity and productivity. Smith (1997) outlines useful stages of analysis whose overall aim is the categorisation of collected data within the context of a developed theoretical framework. The first stage of analysis was to select and define problems and concepts in relation to the use of PR. Once established, these observed phenomena were then placed within a Grunigian theoretical framework of Symmetrical communication. This study pays particular attention to the use of public relations to communicate and build a relationship between MPs and their constituents as the specific unit of analysis. Core concepts of unit of analysis in this case study: include the dimensions of relationships (trust, involvement, dialogue, mutual benefit). Each of these different units may have different questions asked of them. For example is this kind of relationship ethical, effective, symbiotic and ultimately, democratic.

Limitations: Observer Bias

The issue of observer bias surrounding data production that is mediated by the researcher is a common theme in literature on qualitative methodology. It could be argued that, data production relies more on the researcher's skill of observation and selection, according to their abilities, rather than the method of participant observation itself. The point of concern is susceptibility of researchers to omit a whole range of data in order to confirm their own pre-established beliefs — leaving the method open to the charge of bias. On the contrary, Smith states that the ability to produce untainted data is a myth, "Observations are always theory-laden, so trying to reach a natural setting is questionable. There is a constant interaction between theory and data" (Smith, 1997, p.88). Hence, the validity of participant observation is not necessarily dependant upon its objectivity. "On the contrary, it is desired that the participant's account will reflect his or her own personal attitudes and interpretations. Thus, rationalisations, prejudices and opinions are quite as valuable as objective descriptions" (Shaw, 1966, p.2).

Methodologically, this case study is considered advantageous to the field of Public Relations by answering the call for empirical research into the application of the two-way Symmetrical model (Grunig & Hunt 1992; Turrow, 1995; Pavlik, 1996; Botan & Taylor, 2004). In addition, localised primary research in PR is desirable due to the paucity of Australian-based case studies in order to build on the Australian body of PR knowledge.

Chapter 4 Hasluck A Litmus Test

Mr Henry described his marginal seat as a litmus test — an indicator of who would retain or attain government at the 2007 Federal Election. This chapter backgrounds the external factors that affect the use of PR in the electorate office. Mr Henry faced two major external issues during his first term: the controversial approval of the Buckeridge Group of Companies brickworks manufacturing plant and the Australian Council Trade Unions' 'Your Rights at Work Campaign' that targeted Hasluck using activist-style campaigning. Due to these factors and Mr Henry's marginal status, the Liberal Party machine micromanaged Hasluck, enforcing a disciplined hierarchical campaign. This chapter describes the role of the Government Members Secretariat, Campaign Headquarters and the Hasluck Campaign Committee. In the last section of this chapter, the legislative framework for electorate office staff is discussed, outlining the structure and purpose of staff roles. This chapter ends with the announcement that provided a rationale for the research topic. In January 2007, an additional staff allocation was given to all federal MPs. Of central concern to this thesis is how this staff position could be utilised in the future to benefit both the MP and the constituency.

Electorate Profile and Analysis

If elections were won on the MP's profile alone, Mr Henry would have occupied a safe seat. Mr Henry had been a local community member for two decades and occupied a wide-ranging career before entering politics: from a jackeroo to small business owner, from a Wall Street start up company to Chief Executive Officer of the Master Plumbers Association and Chairman of the World Plumbing Council. However, Mr Henry presided over the Liberal Party's most marginal seat in WA and it is not without irony that this electorate is called 'Hasluck'. Indeed, only 700 voters out of 80,500 needed to change their preference to deliver Hasluck back to the Labor Party.

Hasluck was referred to as 'a mortgage-belt marginal' (The Australian, June 28 2007). The outer metropolitan seat of Hasluck is located east of Perth, is home to retail, transport and service industries with some light industry, market gardens and

vineyards in the northern part but mostly residential areas. It is quintessential Australian.

Due to Hasluck's marginal status Henry attracted speculation by political commentators in the hype preceding the 2007 federal election. Green (2007) stated that:

There are only four seats in 'real play', two Labor and two Liberal. At a close election, these could be critical. The battlefield seats in the west could determine retains or attains government. Labor will be keen to win back the two seats lost in 2004 (Green, 2007).

Indeed, the efforts of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) were concentrated in the WA marginal seats (Hasluck and Stirling). Electoral Analyst Jeremy Buxton described the precarious electoral position of Hasluck:

The Liberal Party could only rely on the Kalamunda/ Hills section, but Labor's only blue-ribbon section is Midland — all the others are both marginal and volatile. Any fall in support in any one of a range of areas will cost Mr Henry the seat (Buxton, 2005).

This pressure emphasised the need for Mr Henry and his staff to use effective communication strategies in order to promote a strong case for Mr Henry's re-election.

The constant speculation and reporting of opinion polling turned the fate of Hasluck into a somewhat of a horserace. First, it was declared that "the Liberal incumbent is trailing in Hasluck but gaining ground" (Australian Financial Review, May 7, 2007). Yet, four weeks later the West Australian conducted an opinion poll of 400 Hasluck constituents and declared that, "The Liberals will hold the two key WA seats" (The West Australian, June 15, 2007). On the edge of polling day, Kim Beazley stated that, "the marginal seats in WA will decide this election (The Age, November 20, 2007). The constant opinion poll speculation increased the anxiety of Mr Henry and his staff.

Major Issues

In addition to being highly marginal, the first two years of Mr Henry's term was plagued by the proposal of the BGC Brickworks. Spanning from April 2005 when BGC initially indicated their preferences to build a clay brick manufacturing plant at Perth Airport until it was approved in 2006 by Mr Henry's own government (and re-surfaced when Mr Henry's opponents exploited the matter closer to the election). Community involvement in the issue was high, based on their health, safety, environmental concerns. Federal Minister, the Hon Warren Truss (who was responsible for the approval) described community opposition to the proposal as 'overwhelming' (Truss, 2006). The brickworks issue posed a threat to Mr Henry's re-election because his inability to stop its approval may have been enough to influence the 700 votes that would decide if Mr Henry's first term was his last.

The electoral vulnerability of Mr Henry attracted peak union body the ACTU in their attempt to end Howard's reign and overturn the Workchoices legislation. The ACTU's had a cunning six point election strategy:

identify members who live in marginal seats; identify undecided voters; follow up potential activists and support; register members not enrolled to vote; systematically contact undecided voters; and campaign in workplaces ("Union army to hit seats", The Australian, 13 June 2007).

The ACTU devised, managed and funded the 'Your Rights at Work Campaign', which successfully appeared as separate interest group using subversive campaign strategies.

For example, the ACTU maintained pressure on Hasluck throughout the year. On March 31st, 2007, they met outside Mr Henry's office in protest and this stunt was published in local papers. The headline read, 'community rallies against IR laws' (see Appendix). At every local event, the ACTU and ALP campaigned side-by-side for Mr Henry's defeat. In the week of the election, ACTU members stood on the road entrance to Mr Henry's office waving signs saying, 'sack Henry'. On election eve, the ACTU demonstrated their guile: once local council and main roads (who govern the use of curb side advertising) had closed office at 5pm, the ACTU'

volunteers lined the streets of Hasluck with posters on star pickets. Mr Henry's campaign volunteers had set up polling booths throughout the night, and found some destroyed and vandalised with human faeces by the morning. On Election Day, it was glaringly obvious that Mr Henry's campaign had been outmanoeuvred. The combined forces of the ACTU and ALP meant that they covered each polling booth with double the promotional collateral and booth workers. Even the remote booths in the electorate that were typically Labor leaning, were over-represented by Mr Henry's opponents. To compete with the ACTU grass roots approach, Hasluck needed localised research and flexible, locally driven campaigns. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

Intra- Party Organisational Structure

The ability of the ACTU and ALP to mobilise quickly, effectively and emotively stood in stark contrast to Hasluck's operational rigidity. The aforementioned external issues brought sizeable challenges to the first term incumbent and the combination of these factors resulted in the Liberal Party National Campaign exerting maximum control in an attempt to retain Hasluck. The next section describes how the internal Party machine micromanaged the key seat. The Liberal Party chain of command is depicted in figure 1.1 below.

Government Members Secretariat (GMS)

The role of the Government Members Secretariat was to coordinate a whole of government communications strategy, "The GMS is a small but important cog in the government's public relations infrastructure" (Errington & van Onselen, 2004, p.13). GMS was controversial because it was taxpayer-funded yet unaccountable to the Parliament (the twelve GMS staff members are the responsibility of the Chief Government Whip and therefore avoid parliamentary scrutiny). Senator Eric Abetz reasoned that GMS 'provides information and resource support to parliamentary members' (Abetz, 2004). More specifically, "The importance of GMS lies in the way it connects the government's national communication strategy with individual members of Parliament, most notably those members in marginal seats" (Errington and Mirgiolotta, 2007, p. 89). Historically MPs' offices have always responded

particularly promptly to a call from the Prime Minister's Office. In modern Australian politics, a call from the GMS now elicits a similar response (Errington & van Onselen, 2004).

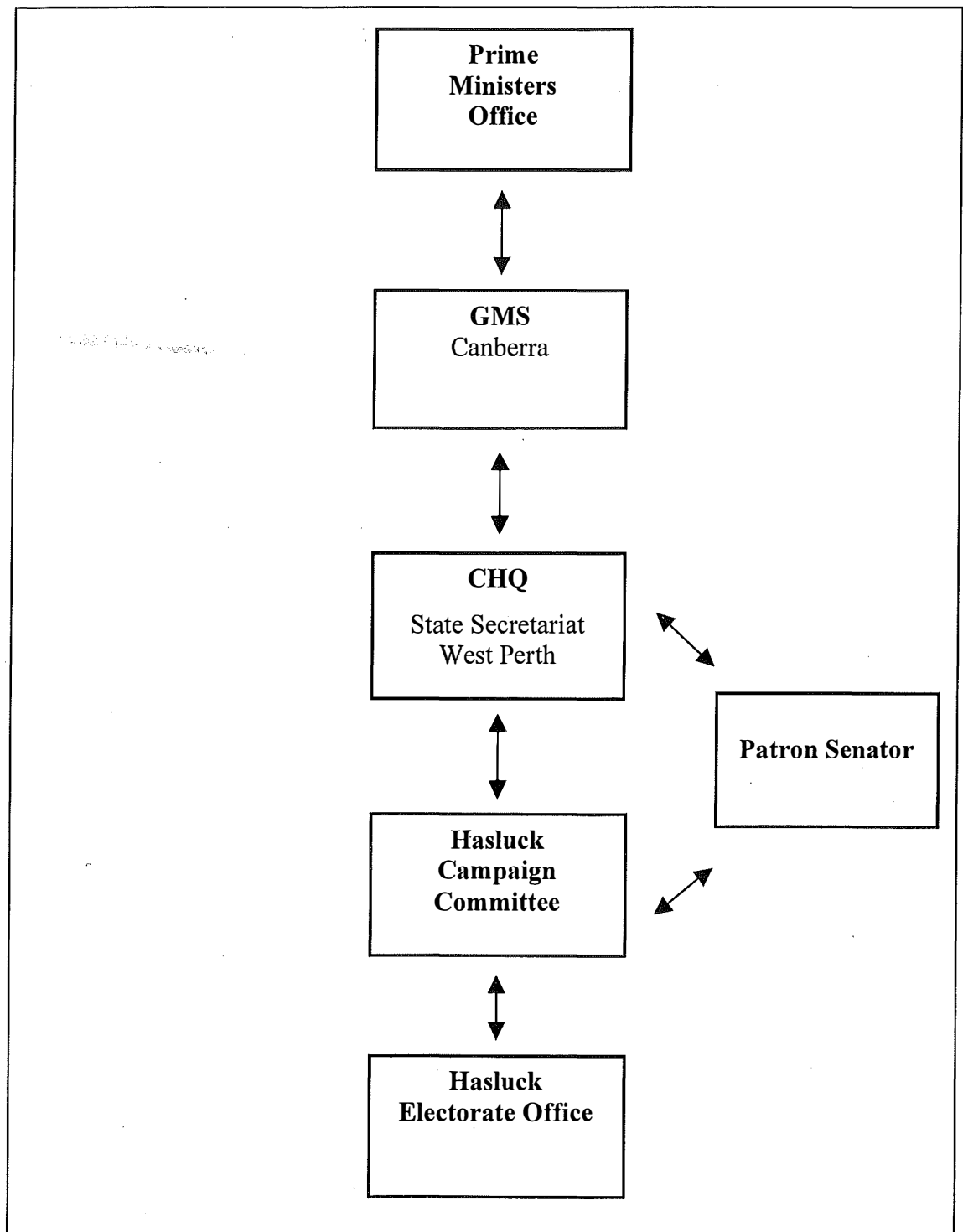


Figure 1.1 Chain of Command

Campaign Headquarters (CHQ)

The State arm of the Liberal Party also has the capacity to intervene in the day-to-day operations of marginal seat electorate offices. GMS and CHQ operate at the macro-level of the government and subsequently take a national Liberal Party perspective. A significant role is carved for GMS in the way that their objectives are issued to marginal electorates through CHQ. Even though Mr Henry wanted a local campaign, he was 'straight-jacketed' by the Party.

The Campaign Committee

The campaign committee operates at the micro-level and is responsible for overseeing Mr Henry's campaign. Yet their power is neutralised by CHQ and GMS. The campaign committee was formed at the beginning of Mr Henry's term meeting on a monthly basis throughout 2005 and 2006. The committee was comprised of thirteen long-reigning members of the Liberal Party. Committee structure tends to be uniform across electorates, using a chairperson, treasurer, secretary, patron senator, representative from the state secretariat, divisional president and a campaign manager. There is also a coordinator for each major campaign activity: in Hasluck, there was a coordinator for fundraising, promotion, volunteer mobilisation and polling day as these activities require sizeable human resources and logistics management. Obviously, the committee's objective is to win and thus its significant resources (both human and financial) are devoted to promotional PR.

The Patron Senator

A convention for the major parties is for a 'patron' Senator to be assigned to assist a marginal lower-house seat. The role of this patronage is to provide resources and contribute personal time and effort such as outsourcing their own staff to the campaign or electorate office when required. Hasluck used the patron senator's office entitlements to provide office supplies for polling booth kits, send direct mail using printing and postage entitlements. Patronage is common practice for the both major Parties and is deeply rooted in convention although its legitimacy is

questionable (van Onselen, 2004). The senator also helped manage the tension between the intra-party structures and Mr Henry:

...acting as a conduit between the central party and the local, often inexperienced, marginal seat non-incumbent candidate or MP. The Senator can act firstly from the perspective of understanding the central party's campaign focus, but also with knowledge of the issues on the ground within the local election campaign they are operating. In short, they attempt to balance central and local party interests in order to effectively campaign and thereby win elections (van Onselen, 2004, p.15).

Hasluck's patron senator was an asset to the campaign, spending weeks of their own time and resources to doorknock on 2000 homes in the most marginal sections of the electorate during 38-degree heat.

Electorate Office Staff

The structure of Federal electorate offices is of central importance to this thesis as it aims to suggest improvements to the use of PR at this level. Given that electorate office staff operate at democracy's interface between MP and constituents, it is worthwhile assessing their contribution. In a discussion paper issued by the Democratic Audit of Australia, the role of staff is encapsulated by a singular overarching objective, "to assist parliamentarians to perform their democratic function" (Verrier, 2007, p.6).

In addition, this paper takes the view that staff should support the MP to service the electorate because their remuneration is taxpayer-funded. In the spirit of realism, this paper also acknowledges that staff must advocate their employer and support their re-election. Therefore, while the overall objective of staff is to assist MP in their democratic obligation part of their legitimate function is to promote the MP (in order to retain the seat). This paper will argue that these aims are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

MPs have the legislative power to determine how their support staff roles are executed. The *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984* (MOP(S) Act) is the legislative basis for the employment of staff to work in their electorate offices, The

legislative framework details the resources entitled to the office and the allocation of staff but does not define staff roles. Rather, leeway is given to the individual MP, “Staff are engaged on behalf of the Commonwealth, but are selected by, and are responsible to, their employing Parliamentarian” (Auditor General Report, 2007).

If an MP was interested in reforming staff positions, they have the ability to do so as long as it conforms to the key areas of the representational duty. From several government papers, broad realms of representational responsibility are outlined. A useful framework is provided by the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee’s investigation into ministerial and electorate office staff. Here, it is discussed that Members of Parliament need staff, “to assist them in dealing with their constituencies; to help them deal with policy issues; and to help manage their parliamentary responsibilities” (2003, p.5). Therefore, in striving to support the MP to carry out their role, there should be a balance between their representational (constituency-focused) and parliamentary duties (Verrier, 2007). From these formalised descriptions, an MP’s time and energy must be devoted to servicing the electorate and representing their interests in parliament.

These papers also offer a generalised description of staff duties. Both Senators and Members of the House of Representatives require a wide spectrum of support services. More specifically, the Auditor General’s reported stated that “MOPS (S) Act staff perform a wide range of tasks: policy advice, administrative support to their employing Senator or Member, as well as advice and assistance to constituents” (Auditor General Report, 2006).

Job roles have been rigid and uniform throughout each federal electorate office for over twenty years. From July 1984 until its amendment in January 2007, the MOPS (S) Act stipulated that each Senator and Member be entitled to employ three full-time staff. The three staff roles comprise of a media officer (promotion), an electorate officer (constituent assistance) and a diary secretary (administrative).

In order to understand the specific functions of each role, I collected and collated advertised vacancies for each position. The media officer’s role for Mr Henry’s office was advertised as “Media and Public Relations, newsletter and brochure

development, speechwriting and other communications.” In addition, a specific list of competencies and tasks specific to the function was outlined: “media monitoring, liaising with government departments and agencies, a keen understanding of political issues and liaising with media organisations.” At no point in the advert was the word ‘relationships’ used. In fact, the word ‘relationship’ is not used in advertised positions for electorate office vacancies in general. This is interesting because it signifies either that relationship management is not regarded as a useful or desired skill for MP’s staff to possess, or the ability to manage relationships is implicitly embedded and therefore an explicit reference is not required.

The diary secretary maintains the MP’s schedule, appointments and parliamentary travel. The role performs general office duties, such as managing reception and in assisting the MP with a considerable volume of correspondence. The electorate officer conducts face-to-face appointments in an attempt to resolve the individual concerns of constituents by contacting the relevant Federal department on their behalf. From these descriptions, both the diary secretary and the electorate officer assist the MP in relation to the primary areas of responsibility: parliament. However, by the Democratic Audit’s standard, the media officer role is an aberration of the formalised view that staff should support the MP in their democratic responsibility to parliament and constituency (with the minor exception of parliamentary speechwriting, which is infrequent for backbenchers). These job descriptions reflect the static and entrenched nature of political office bureaucracy.

It is then surprising that it went largely unnoticed when Federal electorate office changed structure for the first time in over twenty years. On the 11th of January 2007, Special Minister of the State, the Hon Gary Nairn MP announced the allocation of an additional full-time staff position to all federal MPs. Furthermore, the extra staffer for one hundred and fifty Members and seventy-six Senators comes at a cost to taxpayers of \$10m per annum (Auditor General’s Report, 2006). At first, this may not seem significant enough to dominate the news cycle, since we are already spending \$104m per annum on MPs personal staff. Yet it is interesting to note that the Minister’s justification for the change was, “to assist with the increasingly significant and complex workload of parliamentary and electorate duties brought about by improved communications and new technology” (Media

Release, 2007). This may be true to an extent but it is certainly not a holistic description. In reality, the extra full-time staff member provided a much-needed in-house campaign worker to increase the Liberal Party's incumbent advantage in an election year.

This chapter has provided an overview of both the structure of the campaign hierarchy in the Federal Liberal Party and the structure of Mr Henry's electorate office. Staff roles were also discussed as these represent the interface between the electorate and the public. During the Federal election, Mr Henry's office suffered from 'operational rigidity' not only because of defined staff roles but also because of constraints imposed by GMS and intervention by the State and Federal Secretariats.

Chapter 5 A Democratic Function

In 2004, when the newly-elected Member for Hasluck arrived in Canberra, he was not handed a job description on how to be an MP. Since, the previous chapter established that an MP should perform a democratic function this chapter presents Mr Henry's personal account of how he fulfilled this role. While Chapter 4 introduced Mr Henry's electoral office and the external factors that it operated under during the campaign phase, this chapter offers an in-depth look into the mind of Mr Henry three months out from the Federal election. In analysing his reflections on his journey throughout his first term, several themes emerged which will be discussed in this section. The major themes are: firstly, the democratic values that are intertwined and inseparable with the use of relationship-building in managing issues. Secondly, how democracy is done in the process. Other insightful nuances include the subjective motivation, satisfaction and pressure of being a representative.

The pursuit of service over the pursuit of power

In political life, the starting point is motivation. The dynamics between the two concepts of power and service emerged when Mr Henry was asked why he decided to run for the seat of Hasluck. There must be a driving force strong enough to endure, the process from pre-selection, 12-months of campaigning as a candidate to being elected. Mr Henry explained that MPs are distinguished by two kinds of incentives:

There's got to be motivation for people to get involved in the political process. I felt that I could contribute to the community, so for me personally it was about the pursuit of service. But many people enter politics with the view of getting power and it would be an important motivator for many people. As far as I'm concerned, power for power's sake is hollow because you can't use it. The recognition for being productive and effective is real power. If you aren't acknowledged for being effective, then you don't have real influence or recognition and you don't have power.

Therefore, retaining power was not Mr Henry's primary concern; rather he viewed power as a by-product of his primary goal — to serve. Mr Henry alluded to the

prospect that these two motivators might play out in different ways. A sincere motivation to serve acts as a constant focus on constituents interests. Whereas, the MP motivated by power would be concerned with maintaining power (or the fear of losing it) and perhaps be inclined to focus on self-interest instead. Mr Henry suggests that an MP's dedication to serve a democratic function is governed by an adherence to internal values:

I think that the Australian public is politically astute they do value their democratic rights and political freedoms. We should not take it for granted. There would be a huge response from our community if any politician acted in an undemocratic way. There is a deep-seated conviction to democracy and I am driven by a clear sense of democratic principles and justice.

This signifies that Mr Henry understood the broader importance of his role; the impact that it has on the lives of his constituents. It seemed that Mr Henry's conceptualisation of his role was inseparable from its values.

The great challenge of politics

The interview was conducted in September 2007 without knowing when the election would be called but with a growing sense that it was looming. Mr Henry describes how it felt to be facing re-election as a 'first-termer':

I refer to my first three years as the member for Hasluck as my apprenticeship and I am preparing myself for my final industry exam as we used to call it in the trades. And I've got 80,000 assessors out there waiting to either mark me as a pass or mark me as... (long pause)... a failure.

{Probed: how does that feel?}

Well it's challenging but I enjoy being challenged. I think that it is the great challenge of politics... those who are prepared to put themselves up to be assessed by a constituency. My life begins and ends again on Election Day and I don't know the date... (Smiles).

Mr Henry moved on from the emotive insights to explain how he reconciled the pressure from the 'final exam'. Mr Henry talked candidly about the need to be resilient and measure 'success or failure' internally:

You need a strong sense of self, and therefore the ability to assess your own contribution to the community on its merits, set by your own values. I get a sense of achievement from some great outcomes in the community.

With this stance, if Mr Henry 'failed' on polling day, his achievements (and the values implicit within them) would be a consolation. Mr Henry displayed an internal sense of accountability to the electorate; ultimately, he was answerable to himself. This is important because while citizens may hold elected officials to account on polling day an MP who values their contribution will hold themselves to account in between elections. Mr Henry found it more constructive to focus on his daily performance than worry about the lack of job security:

For me it comes back to the issue of personal integrity. My commitment is to do the job well, and then you will get the outcomes that you want. There may be many challenges in politics but if you do the job well, represent the constituent, understand policy and just work hard... the future will look after itself. If you don't perform well in the job you've got then you can't be assessed positively for future opportunity.

On what criteria would Mr Henry be assessed? Mr Henry believed that voters' expectations were about his ability to provide democratic processes and outcomes:

I think it's a performance assessment. I think it is about service delivery and I think that is how people will assess me. Have I done the job: a) as there representative in Canberra and b) what outcomes have I achieved for the electorate of Hasluck.

For Mr Henry the greater challenge was how to provide these processes and outcomes to the entire electorate:

I came into this with a blank sheet of paper but I didn't really get a sense of the challenge and the scope of Federal politics or being a Federal Member. And there is certainly a huge scope of issues that the constituency expects you be across, I've got 80,000 constituents with 80,000 separate views and I do as well as I can in that regard.

Doing Democracy

An MP's life *feels* like the constant managing of issues. It is by nature an issue-dominated environment and the MP is the local conduit for their constituents' views. Managing the issues in the electorate consumed most of his time, illustrating that dealing with the community's issues is an inescapable obligation of Federal Members. Mr Henry elaborated on how representative 'does' democracy. Firstly, he placed implicit importance on his constituents' views in determining which issues they wanted him to advocate:

It is about being their representative about being their advocate so that they feel comfortable, that I am out there understanding what their issues are and providing processes to resolve those issues.

In providing the democratic process, Mr Henry took a bipartisan approach to advocacy:

At the end of the day, whether people have voted for me or not, if somebody has an issue and it is a real issue for them, then I think that it is important that we do what we can. It is their issue and whilst I endeavour not to take ownership of that, in a sense, I'm like any other professional who deals with somebody else's problems.

How Mr Henry managed the Brickworks issue provides an example of relationship-building in the issues management process. Following consultation Mr Henry would advocate the issue:

Where those issues need to be addressed, I raise them either in the party room; with the department and then I follow them up. Or I raise them directly with the responsible minister, then follow up. There have been several issues that have been brought to my attention that I have endeavoured to bring towards resolution.

Thirdly, Mr Henry described the resolution phase:

We either come up with policy solutions where necessary to address any shortfalls according to their needs but also provide resources where necessary. Sometimes you get an incremental change in the process sometimes you get the full extent of the issue addressed and changed and some of these are raised by community organisations or they are raised by individuals.

In his maiden speech, Mr Henry set the agenda for his first term. Mr Henry declared to the 41st Australian parliament that, “the word ‘privilege’ is often used too easily. But as I sat down to write this first speech and now as I stand here to deliver it, I can think of no better word. I represent all the people of the electorate of Hasluck, without fear or favour. It is because of them that I stand here today, indescribably proud to be their Federal member for the seat of Hasluck” (Hansard, 2004). Mr Henry recalled the promises of his maiden speech in the interview:

It is far more important as the officially elected member of Hasluck that I represent the people. And when I made the commitment to the people of Hasluck that, I would represent their views without fear or favour I did not do that lightly or superficially. As the Member for Hasluck that is not something that I shy away from. It gets back to the point of having a clear sense of democratic principles and justice.

Mr Henry demonstrated his commitment to his constituents over his own government in his opposition to the BGC brickworks. In March 2005, Mr Henry coordinated a 3,000-signature petition to table in parliament, a public rally on 30th November 2005 and another 5,000-signature petition in early 2006. The numbers of signatures alone represented enough of a margin to swing the seat. Although he was unable to stop its approval, Mr Henry lobbied against his own government for stringent environmental and development conditions to be imposed on the project.

In an effort to manage the issue through dialogue and negotiation, Mr Henry formed a community consultation committee (CCC) to oversee the compliance of the sixty conditions imposed on BGC. The CCC involved eight local community representatives that provided a conduit for communication that gave assurance that the community had some say in monitoring the project. In a statement issued by Mr Henry, he commended BGC on their willingness and agreement to participate fully in the CCC, “I believe its independence will provide credible outcomes to the community” (Media Release, 2006). Mr Henry believed that there were real and substantial benefits for all parties in conducting a successful community consultative process. Henry viewed the dialogic process as an initiative to build constructive links between industry and the local community.

Mr Henry's Symmetrical approach to this issue demonstrates that he understood the capacity of communication to give voice and agency to the community on the issues that matter to them, "We're not always going to get a favourable resolution but I am committed to the process." His involvement in the brickworks issue signified that Mr Henry operated in the best interests of constituents by taking a stand against his own Government. He worked tirelessly on the issue to advocate their views. In his commitment to the process, Mr Henry was 'doing' democracy.

Building Bridges

Mr Henry believed that an MP could not do democracy without relationship-building:

One simply can't be a representative if one is not interacting with these organisations. It's an important part of being the federal member. You can't do it without building a relationship... a relationship is very important.

These comments provide evidence that relationship-building is a vehicle for carrying out an MP's role. Mr Henry elaborated on how the procedures of relationship-building facilitate his representational duty. Mr Henry emphasised the importance of dialogue in gaining a first hand understanding of his constituents views:

An MP is out there to deliver a range of outcomes for the electorate; you do that by listening to their needs and then do everything that you can to cater to those needs. In order to get a sense of the general consciousness of the electorate, it is very important that MPs are listening. {Prompted: How do get this sense?} Well you're out talking to people.

Mr Henry's typical day was a flurry of activity. Most days began with an early-morning commitment, such as a breakfast meeting. Mr Henry would return to the electorate office intermittently throughout the day to return priority calls and sign piles of letters before rushing to another appointment. The rest of his time was spent out in the electorate. Mr Henry's schedule was demanding enough to necessitate a full-time diary secretary:

I attend a whole range of functions: chamber of commerce meetings, schools, P&C committees, RSL clubs, senior's organisations, aged care organisations, sporting clubs. The whole spectrums of those are an important part of my broader constituency — in an organised sense.

As mentioned earlier, an important aspect of representation is canvassing the views of the electorate. Mr Henry talked about this process using first-person references, which implicitly suggests that this pivotal part of his role was a responsibility that he carried alone:

I get a lot of feedback through these formalised communication channels but I also address their meetings so there an exchange of information in that process. The executives of these organisations will then just call or meet with me or write to me on a range of concerns that they may have individually or collectively. So feedback takes many forms. And I think that's why it is very important that members are listening.

Mr Henry used these appointments to establish relationships. While Mr Henry was able to establish the first contact, he could not single-handedly develop strong links with all groups. For example, a local Rotary club hosted the monthly Kalamunda Markets the largest community event attracting over 9000 people from the electorate. This provided an opportunity for the local member to engage with constituents. However, the request to hold a stall at the market was rejected based on 'politicising a community event'. This signifies that Rotary did not view Mr Henry as part of the community but rather a political player outside of community interests. Mr Henry's involvement was perceived as a Liberal Party campaign stunt rather than a local representative interested in playing a role in his community's main event indicating the lack of relationship capital between Mr Henry and this key community group.

With only a limited amount of time to spend at each appointment it seemed that Mr Henry was spread thinly between the wide ranges of groups who relied on his advocacy to resolve their issues. What's more, Federal MPs are out of the electorate during sitting weeks, which are approximately two weeks out of every month (excluding January, April and July). Due these logistical constraints, MPs are not physically available to build close relationships with community groups:

“I wish I had more time I can’t possible see all of them and attend my parliamentary duties but that’s what staff are for.”

Here, Mr Henry explicitly calls for staff to support his democratic function, which principally involved facilitating the relationship-building process with community groups. The following chapter investigates the extent to which staff assisted Mr Henry in fulfilling a democratic function.

Chapter 6 Inside the Electorate Office

This chapter compares Mr Henry's voice and vision with participant observations of the Hasluck electorate office in the twelve months preceding the 2007 Federal election. Of particular focus is how PR is used by staff and to what extent staff supported the relationship-building process pivotal to Mr Henry's role. Furthermore, observation of Party intervention during the campaign phase is recounted demonstrating the conflict of interests between the local electorate and national campaign agenda. The key observations were that promotional PR predominates in an effort to create a positive image of Mr Henry and that Mr Henry lacked the staff support that he needed to implement his democratic vision for his first term. Mr Henry believed that being proactive was important whereas staff roles were reactive, Mr Henry saw the need for research for effective communication, but it was assigned low-importance by staff, Mr Henry valued constituent's feedback but his staff dismissed it — at his peril.

The Recognition Factor

Mr Henry acknowledged the dichotomy within the PR profession: relationship-building is useful to establish community links but promotional PR builds the profile and recognition necessary for political survival. Mr Henry's wife had a long-standing career in PR profession, which may have contributed to his insight into the understanding that PR is more than a promotional tool:

PR is about service and serving... it's about building relationships and being involved. Whether it's in the political, marketing or product context it's about building bridges and building relationships. In a political context, the PR strategy is when you're out there building that relationship with the individuals or community organisations. (Note: all quotes in blue typeface are attributed to Mr Henry 2007).

Relationship-building PR is useful in terms of 'doing his job', being an effective advocate and achieving outcomes for the community but PR is needed to promote these outcomes so that voters are aware of the MP's performance. The main difference is that promotional PR is utilised by a full-time staff member, whereas attempting to build relationships is currently the sole burden of the MP:

“PR is about relationships and trying to increase that recognition factor and build profile... But you can’t have one without the other.”

Hasluck did have one without the other. The media officer is responsible for the bulk of communication with the electorate and is more concerned with creating a favourable image of the MP, rather than serving constituents. This full-time preoccupation with mass media is devoted to producing short-term, image focused, and ‘one-way’ communication in an attempt to build external recognition of the MP. Media officers do not need to know how to build relationships other than how to court journalists. Most importantly, the media officer must be good writer. The need for this skill is apparent in the high output expected; countless media releases, publications, speeches, website content, advertising copy, briefings and reports. The media officer is like a squid squirting ink.

However, this did not mean that the media officer has the freedom to determine content. Due to Hasluck’s marginal status, GMS played a major role in deciding how that recognition factor is built. The media officer is used as the local conduit by the Federal government to distribute its national message. For example, publicity packages were received via email from Ministers’ offices (known as ‘Coalition FYIs’). Each Coalition FYI contained a cover letter explaining the policy or funding and a ‘shell’ media release. Shells are pre-written generic pieces that are easily appropriated by simply inserting the particulars such as the Mr Henry’s name and electorate name in the blank space provided. The media officer is about output, rather than input.

“PR is about taking advantage of the opportunity provided by government initiatives, programs and policies to convince and influence people that those initiatives are appropriate”

Being marginal has its advantages, in order to ‘win consent’, approximately half a billion dollars was allocated by the Federal Government to Hasluck in a bid to retain the seat. For instance, Hasluck schools received numerous grants from the Investing in our Schools Program; major road funding was allocated through Auslink and two Australian Technical Colleges were approved for the southern and northern segments of the electorate, just to name a few.

The funding process is typically instigated by constituents who scan for opportunities to gain Federal funding and apply for this directly. The electorate office is notified by the relevant Minister's office that the application has been successful and the local MP gets to take the credit.

However, there is no concerted effort by staff to seek an on-going relationship that the initial funding created. For example, environmental group Men of the Trees are based in Hasluck. They contacted the office seeking a letter of support from Mr Henry to attach to a federal funding application in order to increase their chance of approval. Once the cheque is delivered the contact ends. Without a staff member who is actively seeking to establish relationships with community groups, such opportunities are lost. The media officer is focused on promotional outcomes and is more inclined to leverage publicity out of the situation. Publicity is an end in and of itself — a photo opportunity and free column inches in the local paper.

“Ultimately, the strategy is about developing your community profile and recognition- and that means being out there.”

Opportunities to establish relationships are constantly overlooked due to the media officer's pursuit of promotional objectives. High-profile Ministers and the Prime Minister visited Hasluck for the dual purpose of promoting the Mr Henry and raising campaign funds. Being a marginal seat, ministerial visits to the electorate occurred at least once a fortnight providing a good opportunity to leverage media coverage for Mr Henry. This is achieved by sending media alerts and releases, briefing media and organising photo opportunities. During the event, the media officer often acts as the photographer and media liaison, rather than using the opportunity to establishing interpersonal relationships with the constituents or community groups attending.

Success for the media officer is published media releases. Media releases are heavily relied upon, despite being a form of uncontrolled communication. Writing media releases that will be published is an art; a practice that hopes the reader will view the article as credible because it has been written by a journalist. However, by seeking third-party credibility via editorial in local papers, the media release must pass through a gatekeeper — the publisher. When media gatekeepers are biased in

their selection of media releases, the ability of the media officer to gain favourable media coverage is constrained. This was the case in Hasluck, where one organisation monopolised the local paper market (three of its publications covered most of the electorate). The State Government featured positively in every issue and media releases sent by the Australian Council of Trade Unions were published verbatim. For example, articles relating to the government Workchoices legislation were referred to as, 'Howard's tough new IR laws'. In comparison, media releases from Mr Henry's office were not well-represented.

In order to bypass the gatekeeper, Mr Henry's office resorted to paying for editorial space. Inserts were included in the form of a 'Hasluck' newsletter. The publisher printed the inserts in a different typeface and paper stock in order to differentiate between editorial and advertisement. Thus, the third party credibility gained from editorial coverage was lost as the inserts were obviously sponsored pages. What's more, this came at a cost of \$6000 per insert per paper. In addition, this revenue provided a disincentive for the paper to publish Hasluck's media releases. Although, PR is often regarded as free advertising; this cost-effectiveness is reduced in situations where media ownership and bias pose an external constraint.

The inside of the electorate office looked like a publishing house that was able to mass produce 'controllable' forms of communication. Printing and mailing publications consume the majority of the annual \$150000 taxpayer-funded communications budget entitled to all Federal electorate offices. Office infrastructure housed an impressive print capability: two large photocopiers, four laser printers, a ristograph for mass-producing Mr Henry's signature, an automatic letter-folding machine that inserted and enclosed envelopes and a franking machine to add postage. It was common for staff to claim overtime allowance and spend days producing electorate-wide direct mail. Direct mail includes newsletters, monthly progress reports, community publications, small business reports, school leaver's packs, the annual budget reports for key groups, senior's policy booklets and brochures on government initiatives and announcements. The significant portion of human and financial resources dedicated to the production of one-way material symbolises the extent to which priority is given to promotional PR.

“The intent and the objective is to win the seat, so it’s about making sure you’ve got the strategies and making sure you do what you need to in order to achieve that outcome.”

The Liberal Party like many other political parties can sometimes adopt pursuit of power over the pursuit of service. This ethos results in compromises. On February the 2nd 2007, I received a call from a member of the GMS they were to arrive in Perth in two days time to take professional photos that could be used during Mr Henry’s campaign. I was instructed to organise local people to feature in photo opportunities with Mr Henry according to national campaign themes. For example, Mr Henry with a tradesman, small business owner, police officer, young family, an elderly person in an aged care facility and of Mr Henry sitting in a classroom reading to children. The purpose behind each of these settings was to symbolise a particular message. For example, making the Liberal Party look like it cares about voters environmental concerns because one image was of Mr Henry at a local swamp collecting water samples in jeans and an Akubra. Another was of Mr Henry standing by a roadside pretending to be talking to a concerned resident about road works. The images were used by GMS in all campaign publications and advertisements to symbolise that Mr Henry was the engaging citizens and acting on the issues relevant to them.

However, if some of the images we did not have local people available. GMS suggested that local members of the Liberal party could be recruited to dress up and act as constituents in several scenes. This practice is commonplace by all political Parties but it blurs the line between promotion and deception. Given that Mr Henry was a committed MP these photographs were not manipulative, the use of lay Party members reveals more about the logistics of last-minute photo shoots than the ethics of the MP. Nonetheless, it would be preferable to have real photos of the MP engaging with real local people, rather than actors.

In comparison to the media officer, the primary business of the electorate officer is real engagement with constituents:

There is a whole range of individuals who will come to this office seeking resolution regarding personal issues... whether it has to do specifically with the tax office, centrelink, immigration or veterans

affairs or local crime...I have to say that I think it is important that we endeavour to address them to the best of our ability. And while they, may only be a small number of the constituency of Hasluck I think it is important that they actually be serviced.

Out of the three staff roles, the electorate officer is arguably the most democratic because interpersonal contact is used to service the MP's electors directly. However, this claim is tempered by the fact that less than six percent of constituents contact their local MP and if their issue is a State matter, they are hand-balled to the local state MP's office. If the constituent's issue relates to a Federal portfolio, the electorate officer will manage the process until the issue is resolved or reaches the full extent of the process. Then the contact ends. The electorate officer is therefore, reactive not pro-active and is only concerned with constituents on a short-term case-by-case basis. By contrast, Mr Henry felt that:

"We should be working pro-actively, in my view with those organisations in order to address their needs"

The office is only aware of constituents needs if they are notified. For instance, constituents had alerted the office to a local transport route that was severely congested due to an increase in heavy haulage. In response, a survey was prepared and sent to the neighbouring area to gauge their views. However, there was not an impetus to compile or log the data, the staff were uninterested in processing the returned surveys; this task became lost in the immediate priorities of their jobs. I got the sense that we were using this, as a promotional tool and was more about 'being seen to be doing something', which became a reoccurring theme.

The Importance of Research

"Research is important using what tools are available to you"

However, Federal electorate offices do not have a research support staff. Without a research-based role, research tools are superfluous. All staff have access to the main constituent database 'feedback' that automatically updates constituent's basic contact information by the Australian Electoral Roll and offered a distinct advantage to facilitate further research. This did not happen. Staff did not leverage this tool for more in-depth or investigative research. Nor did staff regularly log data

to enrich the database. Although they had the funds, and the means, staff role structure does not precipitate a serious approach to research.

The lack of research resulted in a low-situational awareness. For example, it caught the media officer by surprise that local activists were planning to campaign outside Mr Henry's office for a publicity stunt. Despite it being reported in the media that the ACTU were targeting Hasluck, (indeed, they had even posted their intention to meet outside Mr Henry's office on their website). Staff members should monitor the activities of interest groups in the electorate. Again, foresight is required in order to keep the MP informed of the issues that arise and give them the opportunity to prepare a response rather than be on the back foot.

The challenge for a marginal seat like Hasluck is to be able to recourse more polling, canvassing and surveys in the lead up to the election (which is the ultimate poll of course) what their concerns are and then the campaign could craft strategies to cater to them.

In Hasluck, formal 'scientific' research was a rare occurrence when it did occur, the research typified Grunig's definition of Asymmetric PR. For example, State CHQ used Crosby Textor to conduct a benchmarking poll in November 2006. Benchmarking is common in the political arena because it is seen as beneficial to winning campaigns. Firstly, the poll is designed to answer basic questions such as who are the swinging voters and what are their current levels of understanding about the MP. The results from the poll found that Mr Henry's name recognition was low in the southern part of the electorate. In response, it was decided that billboards would be the best strategy to target the geographical area. As a result, thousands of dollars were spent on billboards in the local area. The advertisement contained a photo of Mr Henry, his name sprawled in large font and a politically-correct Christmas message. The campaign committee was satisfied that now everyone in the south of Hasluck knew who Mr Henry was. At times, traditional campaign strategies are dangerously reassuring.

"Research is important and we don't have enough of it. We need to be able to measure responsiveness and results..."

On the contrary, CHQ's Asymmetric view of research is to exploit the messages that will persuade voters. Thus, the benchmarking poll was used insofar as it identified what voters want to hear so that we could craft a messages in response. For instance, the benchmarking poll found that Crime ranked as a significant concern for 25-35% of constituents in the highly marginal pockets of the electorate. Then, on the recommendation of CHQ this data was used to implement a 'persuasive' campaign strategy. The Liberal Party database 'Feedback' was used to identify the swinging voters within these suburbs and were then contacted regarding crime issues. Since research is not a formalised part of existing staff roles, casual staff had to be outsourced from the relief budget for phone canvassing.

CHQ provided the software that generated pre-written scripts for phone canvassing on crime. The opening statement was, "the office has recently received a lot of concerns about crime issue in your area, do you have any particular concerns that you would like passed on to Mr Henry? While at first this may seem to be dialogic, the process was entirely self-serving. Firstly, the opening statement was untrue and the feedback was never passed on to Mr Henry. The results from the phone canvassing were automatically collated by the software but not used to shape action or achieve outcomes. The objective was persuasion — to make swinging voters think that Mr Henry was serving their needs. This particular example shows how CHQ use research to exploit opportunities to influence — in favour of the MP and not the interests of constituents.

Authorise, Authorise, Authorise

The next section of this chapter focuses on observations made during the campaign phase. From inside a marginal seat 'the official election period' is a matter of semantics. By February 2007, the campaign had begun in earnest indicated by the difficulty in distinguishing between electorate office and campaign staff. Formal staff roles had almost disintegrated as they morphed into campaign workers. At this point, I was replaced by a more experience media officer at the behest of CHQ who were concerned that a PR graduate was at the helm of WA's most marginal Liberal-held seat. Although I was retained as an employee, my daily tasks became exclusively campaign-related. It was a welcome relief when the election was called

in October because staff had an excuse to justify their lack of service to constituents. When the office received calls staff would tell constituents that they were unable to help – ‘sorry but we are in the mode of caretaker government’.

There was a change in office atmosphere once the election became the focus. If a communication directive was sent by GMS, it became an immediate priority. The former Prime Minister was renowned for running his government like a tight-ship and his ethos was reflected in the management style of GMS during the campaign. As a media officer situated in the electorate office of marginal seat backbencher, the hierarchy was apparent. The frequent intervention of State CHQ in daily operations ensured conformity and discipline of Hasluck’s communication with constituents (who were now referred to as ‘voters’).

The day after the election was called the campaign committee convened an emergency meeting to receive a personal briefing from CHQ. We were told that there were three priorities: “authorise, authorise, authorise.” This was an intrinsically top-down view and ensured that Mr Henry conformed to the Party’s strategy. State secretariat wanted full operational control of campaign expenditure and authorisation was required for all office communication outgoings. To give an example of the lack of flexibility, in my roll as volunteer coordinator I needed to communicate with polling-day volunteers on a daily basis. However, if I intended to send emails or letters the draft had to be approved by CHQ first, which often incurred a two-day turn around.

One example of conflicting local and national campaign interests occurred when Hasluck was visited by the Treasurer and I had to compete for media coverage of the event with the Treasurer’s media adviser. Compared to the 150 Federal electorates, Hasluck had the eighth highest number of enrolled voters on Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). Peter Costello was taken on a tour of a local industrial site that produced mining machinery. I prepared a brief for the Treasurer’s ministerial adviser that 95% of employees of the company had chosen an AWA and was highly satisfied with higher rates of pay. This would have been beneficial for Mr Henry on a local level due to the pressure from the ACTU.

However, I was curtly told that this was not approved to be mentioned in the joint interview because it would confuse the Government's 'message of the day'.

Another site of contention revolved around GMS' use of Mr Henry's campaign funds to further their agenda. Both CHQ and GMS campaign strategies were funded by Mr Henry's campaign. Of course, this allows GMS to maximise output without incurring costs and therefore avoiding scrutiny of their own operating budget. This was often a source of frustration between Mr Henry and the Party as he had worked hard to source campaign donations. Mr Henry would be instructed that GMS knew better and without local current research or experienced campaign staff, Mr Henry was not in a position to argue. Using GMS' publications templates were tempting for Mr Henry's Campaign as they came pre-authorised which saved time and money on designing our own publications and in seeking authorisation from CHQ.

Despite these conflicts, there were benefits of traditional campaign operational structure. GMS successfully ensured that Hasluck's campaign complimented the national brand strategy. On the 20th July 2007, all marginal seats were 'audited' to gauge campaign readiness. In effect, this signalled the importance of seamless national campaign. GMS managed a secure party intranet to ensure that all individual campaigns stayed 'on message'. GMS controlled Mr Henry's brand from the colours, images and logo used in all campaign publications. GMS produced the copy for newsletters, brochures and advertisements that arrived pre-designed and filled with policy content shaped by the Government's message. GMS operate effectively by distilling national Liberal Party campaign agenda through local channels with the cachet of appearing grass roots.

Although the lack of autonomy was at times frustrating, this was weighed up against the benefits of receiving GMS and CHQ support. The drawn out campaign phase placed a greater strain on campaign resources, both financial and in terms of the energy required from the MP, the Party machine and volunteers. However, in the maelstrom of marginal seat life, I felt as if we lost focus on servicing the electorate. Since the Party machine institutionalises the use of one-way techniques, the constituent does not get an opportunity to have a say or influence the MP. The next section demonstrates how this can be the downfall of the campaign.

Every Vote Counts

People need to use their votes. There are many who say to me, my vote is of no value. Look at a range of seats that are marginal, like Hasluck. We only have to lose 700 votes to lose the seat. So every vote does count. We should not take it for granted.

Although Henry valued his constituents, the Party is more concerned with their own pursuit. CHQ had pre-ordered direct mail pieces without coordination with our campaign committee. Both State CHQ and Mr Henry's campaign committee were sending direct mail to targeted swinging voters (using Mr Henry's communications budget entitlement). Direct mail is a stalwart of traditional campaigning, as an anonymous CHQ staffer declared, "At this late stage in the campaign, all you can do is improve name recognition amongst swinging voters through direct mail."

However, the bombardment of direct mail caused a vocal backlash from constituents. The electorate office received at least twenty phone calls per day from constituents angry about the amount of direct mail that they are receiving (some reported getting up to four pieces of direct mail daily). In total, the office received enough complaints to swing the seat. Staff took these calls for granted and dismissed the complaints 'as the tip of the iceberg' and CHQ continued to send direct mail, regardless of the negative feedback.

On Wednesday the 21st of November, three days from the election, the most critical message was sent to most marginal areas of the electorate via direct mail. It was a Green brochure printed on recycled paper, with a simple message: "thinking of voting Green? Then preference Stuart Henry second so that the Liberals can maintain a strong economy to fund environmental projects." (see Appendix) The direct mail overload cannot establish causal links to voting behaviour; however, informal feedback indicates that the campaign had overused this medium; the ultimate poll was being held in three days time.

Election Day is the start of a new beginning and the end, potentially. It is a great challenge; it is the unknown but then again so is tomorrow. It's not bleak by any means.

On the 24th of November 2007, after a long day at polling booths in 36-degree heat, the entire electorate, campaign staff and polling day volunteers, some 300 supporters rushed to the campaign office to await the election results to come in. The election results were projected on a huge screen against the office wall and the crowd eagerly anticipated each update with national broadcast camera crew looking on as the drama unfolded. By eight o' clock, Mr Henry had won the primary vote but thousands of Greens preferences were tallied and yet to be distributed to the major parties. Eventually, defeat was reluctantly conceded by Mr Henry's supporters. Once all votes had been processed, only 24% (1924votes) of Greens voters preferenced Mr Henry second, whereas his opponent gained 76% (6,020 votes) of preferences. The significant preference sweep gave Mr Henry's opponent the mandate to take Hasluck.

On the 10th of December 2007, two weeks after Mr Henry had lost Hasluck, the campaign committee reconvened to debrief and assess what went wrong. The Chair, Barry MacKinnon stated his main regrets — the campaign did not do enough research and needed stronger relationships. Whereas, Hasluck's patron senator blamed CHQ for Henry's loss, "Canberra just won't listen."

Précis of the findings

In comparing, the practice of PR by Mr Henry, the Party and his staff it becomes apparent that the several contradictions exist. Listed below is a summary of key findings that require further analysis:

1. Chapter 4 showed that the MP does not operate in a vacuum. Chapter 5 explored that Mr Henry's use of PR in the pursuit of service put the interests of constituents first. This stood in stark contrast to the Liberal Party's use of PR in the pursuit of power, which Chapter 6 demonstrated only serves to reinforce their self-interest.
2. Chapter 4 put forward the formal view that staff should assist the MP to perform a democratic function. Chapter 5 took an in-depth look at Mr Henry's self-conceptualisation of this role constituted a value-driven approach to relationship-building PR in order to facilitate the democratic process.
3. However, Chapter 6 revealed that the use of PR by staff does not support the development of strong community links. Instead, the media officer's role fits with Grunig's classification of the first three promotional models: Press agency, Public Information and Asymmetric PR. In practice, this approach produced one-way methods of PR and research that aimed to persuade, rather than build relationships.
4. A key unexpected finding was that Mr Henry's approach resembled normative two-way Symmetrical PR. While he was successful in establishing relationships his ability to further build and maintain these links was hindered by logistical constraints and lack of pro-active staff support.

Based on these findings, the following chapter offers an approach in order to address the areas currently lacking in the electorate office.

Chapter 7 A Symmetrical Approach

The previous chapters demonstrate the fact that the modern electorate office needs reform. Mr Henry was lacking staff support in several critical areas of his democratic function. The additional staff member currently residing in all federal electorate offices should be utilised to assist the MP in four key ways adopting:

1. A more ethical and effective method of communication
2. Relationships management to build and maintain relationships with community groups
3. Symmetrical research to understand constituents and identify strategic opportunities
4. A more participatory approach to managing community issues

It will be argued in this chapter that a Symmetrical approach should be adopted because it would assist the MP to provide the processes and outcomes that constitute a democratic function. This chapter will discuss how the four areas found to be lacking correspond with the each element of the Symmetrical model. Firstly, the Symmetrical model uses two-way, open and honest interpersonal dialogue. Secondly, Symmetry is a research-based model that uses research to uncover points of agreement and engender mutual understanding. Thirdly, Symmetry builds long-term, mutually-beneficial relationships. Finally, these methods combine to facilitate a participatory approach to resolve community issues.

The overarching objective of this discussion is to explore if these improvements would be more democratic. This means that improved communication, research, relationship-building and issues management would be mutually beneficial (of strategic advantage to the MP but also benefit the constituency). This chapter will demonstrate that if the Symmetrical approach is used by staff in the electorate office that the relationship between MPs and their constituents would be improved. In turn, this would strengthen the democratic process because it would provide opportunities for constituents to have a say in the issues that matter to them, and subsequently, their views would influence the actions of the MP.

Symmetrical Communication

Symmetry is the ideal model of PR. This idealism is rooted in the Symmetrical values of communication that are inherently more ethical than the promotional counterparts of PR practice are. Mr Henry's value-driven approach manifested on a practical level as seen in the dialogic form of communication he used with constituents. The Symmetrical model would cater to the value-driven MP because the model is based on similar values. For example, Chapter 5 illustrated that Henry's role is shaped and honed by internal standards, prescribed by notions of service, ethics, integrity and justice. Symmetrical PR is, quite simply, value-based PR. Particularly in a Grunigan sense because the model values relationships among all in a community, balancing both interests in the relationships, which ensures that everyone wins (Wilson, 1994). In this sense, a Symmetrical approach is aligned with values of bipartisanship that Henry displayed in the process of representing constituents.

"Image is important but it must be underpinned by performance, integrity and ethics. Because if you do not have those, then you don't have anything."

Furthermore,

When PR practice is based on Symmetrical values, it brings ethical considerations into organisational behaviour. Public relations professionals are educated professionals who have expertise in working with others to facilitate dialogic communication and relationship-building. And, they must convince their employers, that a Symmetrical approach will enhance their self-interest more than stand alone promotion, at the same time, enhance their reputations at ethical, socially responsible organisations (Grunig et al, 2002, p.323).

However, the findings revealed that when the desire to win is stronger than the desire to serve, ethics are compromised. Chapter 2 showed how previous literature regard the use of spin to create image is undemocratic. The ethical concerns of political persuasion resolve around what Barnay & Black (1994) call identifying the truth threshold. When promotion cross this line, it is deemed unethical. Scholars in the field of political campaign communication, Trent & Friedenberg (1995) view staging photo opportunities as pseudo-events, "Pseudo-events are occurrences that

differ from ‘real’ events in that they are planned, planted, or incited for the primary purpose of being reported or reproduced” (Trent & Friedberg, 1995, p.70). Similarly, the use of phone canvassing designed to construct image without any founding in substantiation, crosses the definition of truth threshold.

A Symmetrical approach would be more ethical than current practice. Two-way communication that strives for mutual benefit out of the exchange is regarded as the only ethically justifiable vehicle for PR. In accordance with Grunigan principles, the goal is open dialogue, and honest exchanges in an effort to resolve issues and reach a compromise (Cutlip, 1995, p. 12). Intimately connected with dialogue are notions such as:

Honesty, concern for the audience, genuineness, open-mindedness, empathy, lack of pretence, non-manipulative and encouragement of free expression. By comparison, one-way methods of communication are associated with deception, exploitation, dogmatism, insincerity, pretence, coercion, and distrust (Pearson, 1989, p.26).

Pearson’s dichotomy between the two distinct approaches is supported by Botan (2004) in his research of two-way and one-way PR roles, arguing that characteristics of dialogue are more human and cooperative than the attitudes symptomatic of monologue. Hence, the dialogic approach of Symmetry would promote a more genuine style of communication. As noted in Chapter 2, this may help reduce cynicism towards MP on behalf of the public who have become weary and distrustful of spin.

I think it’s fair to say you are in campaign mode the day after your elected. There is an intensity about campaigns the intensity is such that it engages the community in the political process. In between elections the community is turned off by politics, they have a passing interest in it. Once we approach the zenith, voters think a little more intently about it based on the performance of their member and their government and a range of other issues that are relevant to them. There’s a huge expenditure of resources trying to show that my claim is greater than my opponents.

Theoretically, the Symmetrical model of communication is regarded as not only the most ethical but also the most effective model of PR (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Botan & Taylor, 2004). Chapter 6 showed how Asymmetrical PR is deeply

embedded in the Party's attempt to persuade voters and that the full-time media officer is the equivalent of a taxpayer funded in-house campaign worker. As the 'zenith' approached, all staff focused on promotional PR. Mr Henry's campaign spent \$300000 on promotional material, ranging from balloons to billboards to brochures. Relying heavily on these methods Mr Henry's campaign assumed that audiences are passive and that media is powerful. It was hoped that constituents would vote for Mr Henry because they drove past an impressive billboard of him on their way to the nearest polling place.

This optimism is problematic. "One question that defies analysis is why participants in the political market place continue to invest at these levels when decades of academic research into the effects of media based political campaigns demonstrate that exposure to campaigns mainly reinforces pre-existing attitudes?" (Iyengar & Simon 2000). Previous work has established that advertising has proven to be successful only at reinforcing *latent* audience attitudes, cognition or behaviours. "Clearly, political advertising is not a panacea" (Garrazone, 1984, p.86). Advertising may build awareness and name recognition but it would be a mistake to assume that this is all it takes to court votes.

Keeping in mind that the findings of this study are recent and that retaining Hasluck was a high priority for the Liberal Party, one might expect that Mr Henry's campaign epitomised cutting-edge campaigning. On the contrary, CHQ based their well-worn communication strategies on assumptions that were disproved over 40 years ago. Lazarsfeld & Berelson, (1944) seminal study argued that media messages have "limited effects." Cohen (1963) states that "The media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling people what to think about." Therefore, rather than trying to influence personal attitudes PR campaigns will find it more feasible to raise the issue rather than shape public opinion about the issue. (Pavlik, 1987, p94)

Despite the expenditure on promoting Mr Henry through mass media channels, Mr Henry's campaign failed to show that his claim was greater than his opponents. It is beyond the scope of this study to make assumptions about the reasons for Mr Henry's loss. Nevertheless, in the campaign aftermath, Mr Henry's campaign team

realised that one-way strategies had lacked a significant impact on Hasluck's deciding voters. Mr Henry's campaign underestimated the power of individuals in determining the effectiveness of advertisements and publicity. In the future, it would serve the Party well to understand that one-way messages are limited in what they can achieve because audiences are indeed, active.

The effect of media on audiences is dependant on several variables such as demographics, media habits, perception and an array of other constraints. For example, media messages will find it difficult to reach certain demographics. Collins and Zoch (2001) conducted a study using focus groups and questionnaires of adult education students from low-income households that compared various methods of communicating pro-social messages, such as through the mass media in comparison to using interpersonal communication to targeted opinion leaders. The authors study suggested that the demographic of the target audience is paramount in determining the most effective method of communication. The author's case study focused on adults of lower-educational status, whose main source of social information, and what ultimately persuades them to act, is information from interpersonal sources — friends, family and other opinion leaders. (Collins & Zoch, 2001, p.209) The authors conclude their article by issuing a warning to PR practitioners stating that campaigns must be based on solid research, identifying target groups and their media usage, before relying exclusively on the traditional mass media (Collins & Zoch, 2001).

While mass-mediated messages incur a range of constraints face-to-face dialogue is considered the most effective way to send messages to all groups in all situations (Jackson & Centre, 2003). Symmetrical communication uses open and honest dialogue and to listen — a form of communication that is more persuasive than communication purely for the purpose of influence (Wilson, 1994).

This is due in part to the ability of the Symmetrical approach to establish trust. A source of information regarded as trustworthy, expert or authoritative is most likely to be believed (Jackson & Centre, 2003). It has been said that PR people could not accomplish there objectives without credibility or trust (Simon, 1980). Furthermore, Lupia and McCubbins (2000) identified trust as an essential element of political

persuasion, “without trust, there is no persuasion; without persuasion, people cannot learn from others and it becomes difficult for citizen to learn what they need to know” (Lupia & McCubbins, 2000, p.72). As seen in Collins and Zoch (2001) study, lower-socio economic groups tend not to trust mass media messages and therefore defer opinion formation to who they consider more trustworthy- opinion leaders.

This thesis does not suggest that the media officer role should be abolished since it is not practical to establish an interpersonal relationship with 80,000 individuals over the course of one term. Instead, Members of Parliament will find it feasible to build relationships with active publics such as opinion leaders who will spread positive word of mouth and use promotional PR to reinforce and raise awareness on a wider scale.

For example, the Symmetrical communication strategy might be regular town hall meetings based on the issues of concern to a particular segment of the community. The MP would talk directly with local people who are active and interested enough to seek out this form of interaction and who are most likely opinion leaders within their various social networks. At the end of the interpersonal discussion, promotional PR methods might include a photograph of the MP with local people and a media release about the public meeting so that constituents not in attendance are aware that the MP was giving local people a chance to be heard. More importantly, the issues raised at the meeting would then be acted upon by the MP. In this way, the communication effort was effective and sincere.

Hence, Symmetry is a theoretically viable communication option that works in unison with other models to serve both the interests of constituents and the MP. This thesis challenges previous claims that the advocacy and Symmetry are in opposition (L’etang & Pieczka, 1996, p.96). Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) have defended the mixed motives of Symmetry:

We have never defined the Symmetrical model as the accommodation of the public’s interests at the expense of the organisation’s self –interest. That would be ill advised and unrealistic. Practitioners of the model are not

completely altruistic; they also defend the interests of their employers- they have mixed motives (p.307).

For this reason, the Symmetrical model is politically viable and tempting for MPs to adopt. Its use in the electorate office would offer mutually beneficial method of communication.

Relationships & Research

A key finding that emerged from the in-depth interview with Mr Henry was that relationship-building is pivotal to the role of representative. These insights revealed that the modern MP, or certainly in Mr Henry's case, recognises the importance of genuine engagement with constituents. Although Mr Henry perceived relationship-building to be his responsibility, staff assistance is needed. While Mr Henry endeavoured to establish relationships with community groups, he did not have the time to service relationships due to his demanding schedule. While Mr Henry was able to establish the first contact, he lacked a staff member to maintain and build up the relationship on his behalf.

A reason for the breakdown in continuity of relationship-building in Hasluck could be attributed to the lack of staff support in cultivating the relationship beyond the first point of contact, "the key to managing successful relationships is to understand what must be done in order to initiate, develop and maintain that relationship" (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p.22). Therefore, sporadic interpersonal contact does not satisfy the definition of relationship-building. Relationships do not exist at a singular point in time; rather relationships are of a reciprocal nature that must be reinforced by a continual process of interaction and exchange:

The public seeks a balance between the social costs of interaction with their local government, and the social benefits gained in the exchange. When costs exceed rewards, the quality of the relationship can be expected to decline. It is this reciprocity, the perception of a quid pro quo, which sustains and nurtures relationships, and continues to add value to them (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p.22).

Despite having the right intention, Mr Henry is not physically available or frequently accessible to constituents simply because of his workload and

parliamentary duties. Spending half of nine months of the year in Canberra means that Mr Henry cannot fully facilitate relationship-building on his own. Due to this logistical challenge, a staff member should fill a proxy relationship-building role on the MPs behalf. Not to replace Mr Henry's role, but to act as a intermediary between MP and constituent. Mr Henry's burden is then alleviated and staff would be available and accessible to service the reoccurrence of dialogue that Ledingham and Bruning (2000) stated was necessary for relationships.

“Firstly you have to prove integrity; you have to gain their trust”

If relationships are the currency of the MP's role, then trust is the working capital. Trust and loyalty takes time to establish in any kind of human relationship. An election year is not the time to start courting relationships to leverage campaign advantage. Constituents are aware of campaign strategies and cynical towards politicians. Seeking support of Rotary in an election year incurred a common cynicism that our efforts were campaign driven. Social researcher Hugh Mackay wrote that: “one day it will occur to political party strategists that elections are rarely won or lost during election campaigns ... voters do not change their minds moment by moment, in response to the thrust and parry of an election campaign; they make quiet judgements in the months – or even years – that precede it.” (The Age, 11 October 2004). This genuine interaction must be reinforced over time in positive exchanges that that both participants in the relationship find worthwhile. Hence, a staff role is needed to implement a long-term Symmetrical approach throughout the MPs term.

Although this study did not set out to explore research practice in the electorate office, it emerged that research is needed to gain a better understanding of constituents. The Symmetrical model would be useful in this regard because it is a research-based model that harnesses research to uncover points of agreement (Cutlip, Centre, Broom, 1995, p. 12). Understanding constituents is the first step in servicing their needs. Not only did Mr Henry describe this step, as a necessary part of his democratic function — servicing the constituency's needs would strengthen his case for re-election. Here Symmetrical research is valuable in using research to understand, rather than promote.

The Symmetrical approach places more importance on receiving information than sending messages. In chapter 5 Mr Henry stated that listening was important to his role. Kent and Taylor (1998) viewed the Symmetrical model as a procedural way to elicit feedback from relevant publics. They disclose relevant information; but, most importantly, they also listen to publics both informally and formally through qualitative and quantitative research. This kind of approach is mutually beneficial; constituents are given an opportunity to voice their concerns and have them actioned. Also, feedback is beneficial for the MP: Both positive and negative feedback is motivating because it provides the campaign with a sense of purpose. In fact, research can be used as a multidimensional tool in virtually every phase of a communication program to systematically investigate and understand situations, assumptions and consequences (Cutlip et al, 2000; McElreath, 1997).

The results from the Hasluck case study confirmed previous studies of research use in the public sector (Wilcox, Ault, Agee & Cameron, 2001). Both attitudinal and time constraints precluded research practice in Hasluck. All staff roles were time poor and overburdened by their primary responsibilities. This is due in part, to the fact that none of the current staff roles felt responsible for research because it was not a formal aspect of their job descriptions. This may offer an explanation as to why Mr Henry's staff attached a low-level of importance to research practice. It was observed that, databases were not up to date, returned data unimplemented and collected media articles were not analysed. Unlike their State counterparts, Federal MPs do not have a staff member with research as a primary function. To rectify the lack of research there needs to be a research based staff role. Only then will updated, rigorous and regular research be a priority.

Another reason why a staff member should conduct research on a regular basis is that research needs to be consistently updated throughout the MP's term to keep up with new enrolments. Chapter 6 found that the use of research in Hasluck was outdated and weak in validity. In 2007, the electorate office was relying on 2001 census data, 2004 election results and benchmarking from November 2006 to select communication strategies. Considering that an electorate is defined geographically, there is a considerable turnover of enrolled constituents between elections, as

citizens' move in and out of the electorate boundaries. In Hasluck's case, the percentage of new constituents between 2004 and 2007 was enough to unseat Mr Henry. Not only is Symmetry a viable model to help build bridges between the MP and constituents, it would also facilitate an on-going research capability.

The Issues Management Process

If the fourth staff allocation in electorate offices adopted a Symmetrical approach, they would combine the use of interpersonal communication, research and relationship-building to assist the MP with managing constituents' issues. Mr Henry expressed that issues management was central to his 'democratic function'. However, the results of this study found that Mr Henry's office lacked a formalised issues management capability despite this being the most challenging aspect of his role. Being an MP already draws on many aspects of issues management therefore, PR scholarship is a logical place to look for guidance on how to improve the way electorate office staff deal with issues (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Symmetrical values are an antecedent to genuine issues management. For example, Mr Henry upheld a value-driven approach reflective of Symmetrical PR; he was motivated to serve in his constituents' best interests and showed a genuine commitment to the democratic process. Lukaszewski & Serie (1993) state that effective issues management has three prerequisites: the PR effort must be visionary (long-term), the effort must have integrity (motivation sincere) and the effort must be based on values. "...a sincere desire to be a good corporate citizen and address real community needs, not for corporate gain, but because it is the right thing to do for people" (p.326). Although this quote uses an organisational term of reference, its relevance is universal. The desire to deal with constituents issues should be in the pursuit of service, not in the pursuit of power. Mr Henry wanted to service constituents' issues but he needed a staff member to support him in this endeavour.

Mr Henry's approach demonstrated that the Symmetrical model of PR is closely aligned to the values of representation. Peters and Austin (1986) state that integrity and a sincere commitment to people and core values must take precedence. On a practical level, this places target publics as the central force in defining issues and

assigning importance to them (Crabbe and Vibbert, 1985). Mr Henry also placed explicit value on his constituents point of view, "At the end of the day, if somebody has voted for me or not, and they have an issue, and it's a real issue for them, then it's important that we do our best." As mentioned in Chapter 5 Mr Henry's defiance of his Party's decision to approve the Brickworks manufacturing plant in his electorate demonstrated bipartisan representation. This is in line with Grunig & Hunt (1984) who claim that partisan interests would be submerged or transcended by mutual interest when the Symmetrical approach is used.

The process of issues management provides a structure for the fourth staff role to follow. Issues management is a public relations term describing a function that involves the detection of a problem, the attachment of significance, and organising activities to manage the issue (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985). Mr Henry's approach correlates with the multi-step process successfully used in the private sector. First, the organisation identifies the needs of the community, initiates programs responsive to those needs and then disseminates information on those initiatives to community members through planned communication programs (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Chapter 5 showed how Mr Henry spent his time consulting with the constituency, advocating their issues and striving for resolution. Reflecting the final step in issues management programs Mr Henry then described the need to use promotional PR to build recognition for his actions. The following paragraphs show how the fourth staff role would apply the process.

Step 1: Identify issues

Mr Henry's procedure resembles Ledingham and Bruning's (2000) issues management approach in all but one aspect. The findings revealed the need for staff to be more proactive in identifying target publics and issues. As seen in Hasluck, community groups raised their concerns with their local representative. This thesis recommends that that staff should use environmental scanning - the name for research that aims to increase the situational awareness of the operating environment. Then staff would be aware of the issues and community groups that are of strategic importance to the MP. The scanning process involves using search tools such as media monitoring, the internet or interpersonal communication to

identify (potentially) relevant publics or issues as they emerge or progress. Environmental scanning should be conducted daily and subsequently the MP should be briefed on the pertinent issues and suitable course of action. The pro-active approach would therefore service the MP better than current reactive staff roles. More importantly, constituents' needs are at the epicentre of this process, which is geared towards win-win outcomes.

Step 2: Consult & Advocate

This part of the process is grass-roots democracy. Mr Henry stated that in order to represent the electorate the MP should be listening to their needs and then doing everything they can to cater to them. 'Talking' was crucial to getting a sense of the broader consciousness of the electorate in order to be across the broad spectrum of issues. If policy formation were left exclusively to elected officials, it would imply that MPs inherently know how to interpret facts and moral issues on behalf of their electors. Since this is not the case, MPs must consult. A staff role taking a Symmetrical approach would support the MP by conducting consultation on his behalf. The MP would then advocate the issue in parliament or lobby the appropriate Minister.

Step 3: Raise awareness using promotional PR

Symmetrical PR and promotional PR can work harmoniously. A staff member using the symmetrical approach would focus on identifying issues and using Symmetrical communication, promotional PR could be used to promote the outcomes of the Symmetrical process to the wider electorate in order to raise awareness and increase the 'recognition factor' necessary to retain the seat.

This process would be of strategic advantage to the MP. In chapter 2, scholars called for a communication model that was both ideal and practical. The Symmetrical model is practical because it would assist the MP to carry out their role. Also practical in the sense that MP's would want to use the model because it is mutually beneficial. Effective relationship-building benefits the MP, by building up loyalty, credibility and trust, which increases the resilience of the MP's reputation.

Arnstein (1994), reported that involving citizens in problem resolution contributes to the strength and durability of long-term relationships and enhanced credibility with members of the community. It is well documented that participation in the process increases the likelihood of acceptance (Jackson & Centre, 2003). When constituents feel like they have been involved in a decision, they are more likely to act favourably. As a by-product, the Symmetrical approach can engender loyalty- a predisposition to view positively the actions of an organisation (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). This predisposition is important for MPs to instil in their voters.

Coombs (2000) argued that only a Symmetrical approach to relationships could minimise the impact of a crisis when it occurs. Crable & Vibbert's (1985) theory of how public policy issues arrive on the agenda, evolve and are finally resolved has helped organisations understand that their financial survival hinges on their ability to conduct effective issues management. According to the authors, the lifecycle of an issue goes through five stages: potential, imminent, current, critical and dormant. These stages allow issues management to be pursued strategically by PR practitioners.

Best-practice issues management involves environmental scanning to pre-empt the potential stage image in order to prevent the issue from progressing to the later (less manageable) stages of the issue lifecycle. For example, environmental scanning is a safeguard for the MP because it acts as a predictor of damaging issues such as the threat of activism. As seen in Hasluck electorate office, staff were mostly reactive to issues, by the time they to the attention of staff they has progressed to less manageable scenarios. With a Symmetrical staff role in the office political issues could be addressed and effectively mediated earlier in the cycle, when they are at the subtle stages of pressures and trends. "In today's society, once an issue reaches the 'current' point in the issue cycle, it is too late politically" (Coombs, 2000). Thus, current practice could be improved with a full-time staff member who is switched on to pre-empting and managing issues throughout the MP's term.

Potential Outcomes

It is worthwhile elaborating on the issue management process in a political context because this is where a Symmetrical role has the potential to make a democratic contribution. The process itself is significant because it describes democracy in action. Chapter 2 established that in an authentic democracy constituents should have a say in the issues that affect them. The Symmetrical model facilitates this process through interpersonal dialogue and relationship-building.

In consultation with a range of community groups, the staff role would encourage dialogue in the group dynamic, as this method would lead to a greater number of opinions and suggestions for problem solving (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Here Symmetrical PR can function as a vehicle for accommodating differing perspectives and valuing the competition of ideas (Grunig et al, 2002, p.312). This is synergistic with notions of a vibrant public sphere.

Mr Henry was a realist: “We’re not always going to get a favourable resolution but I am committed to the process.” This commitment is inherently democratic and ethical. Grunig acknowledges that in some circumstances, the Symmetrical model may not achieve resolution but at least points of agreement will be found within the *process* of seeking resolution.

In my view from my experience, I think we have too many politicians who are not interested in addressing the spectrum of issues and challenges they are too ready to pass the buck to somebody else.

The Symmetrical staff member would take a hands-on approach to relationship-building with constituents and this focus would see genuine engagement being initiated by the MPs office. In doing so, the democratic accountability of the MP to their constituents would be increased. Behn (2001) introduces the notion of democratic accountability, “I suspect MP’s know they are accountable because either two things happen: when they do something good, nothing happens but when they screw up all hell breaks loose” (Behn, 2001). Rather than wait for constituents’ reaction to be the barometer of the MPs efforts, this paper suggests that through the

Symmetrical approach the electorate office would stay focused on serving the constituency.

“Democracy is a huge challenge. We can always improve it.”

Observers of trends in civic engagement remain unimpressed by the opportunities for civic participation available to community groups. A political culture, in which citizens regard participation as both desirable and effective comes the closest to the democratic ideal (Almond & Verba 1980 cited in Heywood, 2002, p.200). As Robert Putnam (1995) argued, democracy depends on the existence of engaged citizens, active in all sorts of community groups, “Only here can citizens engage in dialogue and deliberation that is the essence of community building and of democracy itself” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000, p.549). The observations of this case study confirmed that Federal funding was the most common reason for communication with community groups. Yet, cheque writing hardly seems to satisfy the requirements of authentic civic engagement which:

Implies meaningful connections among citizens and among citizens, issues, institutions and the political system. It implies voice and agency, a feeling of power and effectiveness, with real opportunities to have a say. It implies active participation, with real opportunities to make a difference (Barakso, 2005, p.315).

In practice, the Symmetrical model can be used by MPs and their staff to engage citizens in participation in policy decisions. King & Stivers (1993) point out government can play an important and critical role in creating, supporting and facilitating these connections between citizens and community. There are a range of arguments that can be offered in support of greater citizen participation in the policy making process:

Firstly, it gives more opportunity for citizens to exercise their rights and responsibilities beyond the ballot box are an obvious way to overcome widespread cynicism about the decisions taken by politicians and public servants (Curtain, 2003).

Secondly, Pateman (1970) argues that participation educates and empowers the participant and that this is crucial to the health and strength of democracy. Participants would have a feeling of empowerment through involvement in making decisions that affect their lives (Culbertson and Chen cited from Grunig et al, 2002).

Thirdly, from my own experience ordinary citizens lack access to the decision-making process, especially under-represented groups that are not mobilised on political issues. A Symmetrical approach would proactively engage citizens in dialogue and deliberation that brings latent issues to the attention of MPs (Medaris, 2005, p.53). The theory of Symmetrical approach envisions PR as a force that allows competing groups equal access to decision making (Grunig et al 2002, p.319).

The Symmetrical model is inherently inclusive and participatory. Unlike the one-way models of PR, the two-way Symmetrical model would give constituents the opportunity to have a voice. In Sullivan & Transues (1999) article, *the Theoretical Underpinnings of Democracy*, they support the liberal pluralistic idea that robust democracies need citizens who will participate in politics. They cite Almond and Verba's (1996) cross-national research showing that interpersonal communication enhances citizen involvement in politics (Sullivan & Transue, 1999). Therefore, Grunig's Symmetrical theory provides a strong case, that if the MP wants to communicate with their constituents in an ethical, effective and genuinely engaging manner then the Symmetrical approach is a viable alternative to promotional PR.

Conclusion

Political leaders, media commentators and scholars from varied disciplines agree that a sense of community has deteriorated and acknowledge that we desperately need a renewed approach (Kruckerberg & Stark, 1998; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Engagement between electors and the elected is highly desirable and rather unavoidable in democratic societies (Taylor, Vasquez & Doorley, 2003). Yet the quality of this engagement had broken down indicated by the growing trend in critical and apathetic public who resent self-interested politicians (Putnam, 2000; Belanger, 2005). The only antidote to this political malaise is increased participation in the political process (Stockwell, 2006).

Acknowledging that previous work has identified the difficulty in attaining the ideals of democracy in practice this thesis has aimed to find a viable approach that could facilitate participation at electorate level. In examining the political microcosm, this thesis aimed to observe current practice.

Firstly, it was found that the Party micromanages marginal seats in order to protect their interests. Electorate office communication is interfered with by the State and Federal levels of the Party enforcing the use of an Asymmetrical approach to communication. This is counter-productive as it poses an in-built limitation. Thus, persuasion is deeply embedded in the political system and it is difficult to see an alternative. In the pursuit of power, promotional PR was found to reinforce the self-interest of the Government at the expense of a more participatory form of communication with the electorate.

In comparison, an in-depth look into the perspective of Mr Henry, found that the modern MP wants to use relationship-building PR in order to build bridges with the local community. Therefore, in the pursuit of service, Mr Henry undertook a sincere effort to cultivate a genuine relationship. Here, the use of Symmetrical PR is more likely to occur.

From observation inside the electorate office, a lack of staff support in this regard inhibited Mr Henry's ability to build and maintain relationships with the community

beyond the initial point of engagement. Although Mr Henry attempted to establish real links that resembled the Symmetrical approach, the media officer used one-way strategies in order to build the recognition factor rather than build relationships. The media officer is preoccupied with creating the optical illusion of symmetry. It is easier to design an image where the MP *looks* like they champion the issues that matter to voters rather than institute *real* Symmetry, which involves a more time-consuming and long-term effort. Not only does this raise ethical concerns, it lacks impact on voters who are distrustful of spin-style tactics.

In addition, staff roles were observed and it was found that the traditional structure of roles impedes the use of more innovative communication strategies. For instance, that predominant use of one-way methods results in research that focuses on promotional objectives, rather than giving constituents a voice. Overall, the electorate office is reactive rather than proactive and opportunities to develop strategic relationships are overlooked. Thus, the bureaucratic nature of electorate office structure encumbers the development of new ways to increase productivity or better service the electorate.

Clearly, reform is needed. The second aim of this thesis is to suggest how current practice may be improved. This thesis asserts that a Symmetrical approach would improve the quality of the relationship that currently exists between the MP and their constituents. Firstly, in a way that would benefit the MP: Grunig's symmetrical paradigm epitomises best practice relationship management by harnessing an interpersonal form of communication that is more likely to establish trust and engender loyalty. Symmetrical PR is intrinsically more ethical and effective in comparison to promotional PR.

Secondly, a Symmetrical approach would also benefit constituents. Chapter 2 established that a condition for democracy to exist is that constituents should have a say, Chapter 5 showed that MPs want to listen and finally, Chapter 7 argued that a symmetrical approach would bring these two essential elements together. One example put forward was the use of research as a form of listening that would value the input of constituents. It would provide a mechanism for opening productive dialogue with community groups about local issues. In the process, Symmetry

envisioning a form of PR that is more conducive to meet the needs of the constituency. Thus, symmetry offers a practical, grass-roots solution to the participative dilemma because it would enable constituents to have access to and participation in, their own governance through dialogue.

Although the ingrained use of spin by the Party machine has continued into the next electoral cycle, reform at the grass-roots level would be a good start in improving current practice. A Symmetrical approach envisions the value of PR reaching beyond a promotional tool into a relationship-building function that may help regain a much needed sense of community between the local MP and the community they reside in.

Recommendation

Ultimately, this thesis aimed to conceive how the symmetrical approach could be applied in practice. Chapter 2 questioned how we could implement communicative forms of democracy in the current system. In January 2007, this opportunity was presented when changes to legislation saw each Federal electorate office receive an additional full-time staff member. Sixteen months later, this staff role remains undefined. Perhaps this taxpayer-funded staff role could focus on servicing the constituency.

This thesis recommends that the role should adopt a symmetrical approach to assist the MP to build mutually beneficial relationships their constituents. If implemented the role title could be 'Community Relations Officer'. To pose the hypothetical, their job could be defined as a planned, proactive and continuing participation with and within a community to build and enhance relationships to the benefit of both the MP and constituents (Leeper, 1995, p.163). This role would envision an in-house community expert, whose function would compliment the existing roles. Also, this role satisfies the formal view that staff should support the MP to fulfil a democratic function. This recommendation also answers Mr Henry's call for staff to take a proactive approach to developing stronger links with local community groups.

From my own experience in the electorate office, active community members want to participate in community building with their local MP. On a practical level, the Community Relations Officer would act as an intermediary between the MP and constituent to facilitate a collaborative approach in the step-by step issues management procedure.

In the process, we might witness increased constituent participation in the local decisions that affect their lives. This is in line with ideal notions of participatory democracy. Simultaneously, this role would be politically realistic because MP would want to use this approach, as it would build a credible reputation of the MP amongst community opinion leaders.

Suggestions for Further Study

PR scholars have argued that the role of PR educators and academic researchers should be to serve the profession by conducting research that will advance and legitimise the practice of public relations in an effort to propel the field toward widely regarded professionalisation (Grunig, et al 2002; Pavlik, 1987; Botan & Taylor, 2004; Gregory, 2007). This thesis is part of the continuing exploration of relationship management as the legitimate paradigm for the study and practice of PR. However, this study has contributed by initiating research into the symmetrical model at electorate level. To date the single-minded quest to research the symmetrical model in either the private or non-for-profit organisations has overlooked the potential for Symmetry to thrive outside the organisational discourse. In particular, this study found that symmetrical model might find practical application in the electorate office. A topic of research that remains for future consideration would be to prove that Symmetry is practical, which would help defend the model against its critics who claim Symmetry is utopian.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to prove that PR is democratic; rather this case study has shown that Symmetrical PR *should* be adopted (and if implemented, improved democratic outcomes are likely). This case study is limited to a certain period and a particular set of circumstances of a marginal seat in an election year. Smith (1997) has argued that the observation of small-scale settings leaves it open to the charge that its findings are local and specific. A longitudinal study that tracks change could provide additional insight into the factors which affect the MP and constituent relationship over time as prior research suggests that relationships are not static (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

A suggestion for further study would be to implement the recommendation of this thesis. Implementation of the 'Community Relations' role over a three-year term for an MP would test the extent to which the potential outcomes proposed in Chapter 7 are in fact, achievable. A pilot study would monitor the impact and track the degree to which constituents believed that their needs were being met by the initiatives of the Community Relations Officer. Additional evaluation of these initiatives would be useful to ascertain the extent to which the role improved the MP's relationship with community groups and determine whether the initiatives are generating mutual

benefit. In addition, it would be interesting to explore if a staff role practicing Symmetrical PR would positively affect the MP's case for re-election.

A study of this nature would encourage other MPs to adopt the new approach in their electorate offices with confidence that the role has been fully applied and proved successful in the attainment of win-win outcomes. This remains a question to be addressed by further empirical research of the Symmetrical model in a political context to determine if PR is indeed, democratic.

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